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October 10, 1882.

Vol. XI.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 272.

MINKSKIN MIKE, THE BOY SHARPSHOOTER; Or, COLUMBIA JIM ON THE WAR-PATH.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE DUMB SPY," "ANTELOPE ABE," "KEEN-KNIFE," "PROSPECT PETE," ETC., ETC.



LIFTING THE BOY ON THEIR SHOULDERS, THEY BORE HIM BETWEEN THEM TO WHERE KITTY, JUST OUT OF HER SWOON,
STOOD LEANING UPON HER FATHER'S ARM.

Minkskin Mike,

THE BOY SHARPSHOOTER:

OR,
Columbia Jim on the War-path.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "LITTLE WILDFIRE," "TIGER TOM,"
"DASHING DICK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHOOTING-MATCH.

It was a summer day in the year 1862. The sun shone bright on the valley of the Minnesota river and made glad the hearts of the good people of Pine Valley settlement. That day was one long looked forward to by all, especially the young men and boys, as one big with fate.

The event of that day was a shooting-match. Major Dan Gardette, a fun-loving old frontiersman, was at the head of the affair. He had offered a handsome prize to the best shot under twenty-one years of age. A second, third, and fourth prize was also offered.

So few had been the holidays and amusements of the people of Pine Valley since the settlement had been founded that everybody and his friends resolved to turn out and witness the contest, if for no other reason than to encourage the boys, and show the old major a due appreciation of his efforts to encourage rifle practice among the young men, for at that very time there was no telling what day every man able to handle a fire-arm might be called upon to defend his home from the invasions of the blood-thirsty Indians.

The boys had been practicing for the contest for over a month, and so every boy and his friends believed that he would defeat every other contestant and his friends.

The place selected for the contest was a long, level grass-plot, flanked on one side by the river, and on each end, and on the other side by the woods.

By ten o'clock all Pine Valley was on the ground. The spectators stood along in the cool shadow of the trees at the edge of the opening or lounged upon the green grass.

The target was placed at the north end of the glade, and the contestants were to stand two hundred paces south.

Twenty youths, whose ages ranged from fifteen to twenty-one, entered the lists.

Old Major Gardette was there to superintend the match, seeming to be animated with all the spirit of youth.

Arrangements for the shooting to begin were nearly completed, when an applauding shout burst from the lips of the spectators gathered in the woods.

The cause of this outburst was soon made manifest to all in the appearance of a newcomer, who was known to everybody, for involuntarily every lip pronounced the name—

"Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter!"

This new arrival was a boy of eighteen. He was rather undersized for one of his age, yet his lithe form was straight as an arrow and well developed. His movements were as graceful and supple as those of a young panther. His hair was of a dark brown and closely cropped, and his eyes were of a dark blue, keen as a hawk's, and as restless as the wary antelope's.

His hunting-jacket, trowsers, leggings and moccasins were all of buckskin, handsomely fringed and neatly made. On his head he wore a minkskin cap, without which no one had ever seen him, winter or summer; and it was this close adherence to his old minkskin that gave rise to his *sobriquet*.

He carried a rifle on his shoulder, a knife and revolver in his belt, and a powder-horn and bullet pouch at his side.

To the people of Pine Valley and vicinity Minkskin Mike was well known. In fact, Joshua Newcomb, the founder of Pine Valley, found the youth there, three years before, hunting and trapping among the lakelets and along the Minnesota river; and after a trading-post had been established at the Valley, the young hunter visited the place frequently to sell his furs and lay in supplies. He had become quite a favorite with the settlers. His fine physique, his handsome face, his frank and manly bearing, and his kind and jolly spirit won for him a place in the affections of old and young.

Among the Indians Minkskin Mike was known

as Running Rifle, from the fact that he was one of the most remarkable rifle-shots in the Northwest, it being his wont to take the bounding deer, the leaping squirrel and flying bird while in swift motion, and, if need be, he could shoot with fatal accuracy while he himself was running. He was a born rifleman; this all knew, and it was not to be wondered at when a murmur of dissatisfaction escaped the lips of the contestants, for they felt satisfied he had come to take part in the match, and if permitted to shoot would settle the contest so far as the first prize and championship were concerned.

"I shall object to his shooting," said Randolph Hill, a young man of one-and-twenty years, of a rather haughty and imperious disposition; "he doesn't belong to our settlement, anyhow, and while I do not fear his boasted skill with the rifle, I am opposed to letting vagabond hunters into the match, especially since we don't know whether he would or would not turn squarely against us in case of an Indian outbreak, for he's lived among the Indians so long that he's got to be half-savage himself."

Dolph Hill, as the speaker was better known, was not very well liked by the young men and boys of Pine Valley, for he was insolent and domineering, and thought so much of Dolph Hill and his superior qualities. Generally the boys took sides against him, but upon the question of admitting Minkskin Mike to the shooting-match they were with him unanimously.

"Hullo! good-mornin', Minkskin!" greeted Major Gardette, as the young sharpshooter approached; "glad to see you, boy!"

"Mornin' to you, folkses, one and all!" replied the boy, as he came up, dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and rested both hands across the muzzle.

"What's the news from up Ingin-ward, Mike?" inquired the old major, who of late had been growing uneasy over the rumors of a threatened Indian outbreak.

"Nothin' new as I know of, more'n suspicious-lookin' white men, in broad-brimmed hats and military sort of coats, comin' and goin' there all the time," answered Mike.

"How long's it been since you were in sight of the village?" asked Dolph Hill.

"Just yesterday."

"That's all poppy-cock about them military cloaks," averred Hill, in an undertone, and with a sneer that showed his dislike of Mike; "that boy's tryin' to work up an excitement and get into public favor some time. I think he's spoony on Kitty Hamlin."

"Well, Minkskin," said Major Gardette, "we'll trust to you to keep a sharp lookout, and let us know if there's danger."

"I'll do that, major," was the young borderman's response.

"Have you come up to take a hand in our shoot to-day?" asked Gardette, growing impatient for the work to begin.

"If there's no objections," replied the youth.

"But there are objections," declared the insolent Randolph Hill: "the boys are all opposed to your coming in. Not that they think you a better shot than some of us are, but because you are a stranger."

"That's a darned sickly reason," remarked an old settler who had no interest directly or indirectly in the match, and who had always asserted that Hill was a man nearer thirty years than twenty-one.

"Oh, that's all right," responded Mike, in an indifferent tone. "I'll not obtrude myself on the boys. I never keered much 'bout wastin' powder on targets, anyhow; but when it comes to takin' game on the wing, I don't take a back seat for anything that ever touched a trigger. Go ahead, boys, and don't let me spoil your fun for anything."

"For my part, Mike, I'd like to have you shoot," said Burton Deems, in an undertone, "just to take the conceit and swell-up out of Dolph Hill. He's a rough fool."

"I see, Burt," replied Mike, "where the harness rubs, but it's all right. I've had my eye on that larkey some time, and there may be some developments. He may be a young man as he claims, but he has an old head on him."

"What do you mean, Mike?" asked Burt.

"Never mind now; I'll tell you some time," returned Mike.

"Well, who's goin' to score for us at the target?" called out the old major. "I want some fair, disinterested person, and only one, to keep the tally as I've arranged it."

Several names were suggested, to which the major objected on the grounds of the parties being interested to a certain extent. Finally Dolph Hill spoke up:

"I'd suggest the name of Kitty Hamlin, for

no one would dare dispute her word and fairness in the matter."

"Hurrah! Second the motion," shouted Tim Dolson, and his words were repeated by every one of the contestants.

And so Kitty was chosen to act as target-marker.

The young lady was sent for. She came to where the contestants stood, a slight flush upon her pretty face.

Kitty Hamlin was a maiden of seventeen summers, and was the belle of Pine Valley. She was a pretty, vivacious girl whom everybody loved. A petite figure, a wealth of brown hair, large brown eyes, a fresh and healthy complexion and a sunny temperament, made her a being at whose shrine every young man in the region was wont to worship. Her heart, however, seemed invulnerable to the love of any one of her many admirers. She was not a coquette, but a lovable girl, who had a kind word and a smile for everybody, old and young. Besides all these, Kitty was quite a huntress. Many a deer had fallen at the crack of her rifle. She was really a fine shot, and it was only her womanly modesty that prevented her from taking an active part as a contestant in the match.

"Kitty," said the bland old major as she came up, "you, and you alone, have been chosen as marker for the match. We want you to take a safe position near the target, and whenever a shot is fired draw a line with this pencil from left to right across the bullet-hole, and at the end of the mark where your pencil stops place a figure. Thus, you see John Graves is to shoot first, and he is number one on the list. If he hits the target draw a line across the bullet-hole and put down the figure one at the end of the line on the right. The next shot marks two, the next three, and so on until the last shot is fired. The figures opposite the name on this paper will then indicate the shot and who made it, as marked by you on the target. You see I don't want any of the boys to know how they are shooting until the last one has fired."

"Really," demurred Kitty, "I'm afraid I might make a mistake."

"You are no more liable to make a mistake Miss Hamlin, than any one else," assured Dolph Hill, "and we all know your sense of fairness will not admit of one."

"I will do the best I can, then," responded the maiden, "and if I should get it all mixed up you'll be to blame. Do you shoot, Mike?" and with a smile she turned to Minkskin Mike.

"Not now, Miss Kitty," the boy replied.

A look of evident disappointment passed over Kitty's face as she turned away and proceeded with Gardette to the target.

After having explained again to Kitty her duties he pointed to an immense tree hard by, behind which she was to stand while the shot was being made.

Gardette then returned to the little band of riflemen, each of whom he now found all the more determined to win the prize since Kitty's personal inspection was to be given to their skill.

Finally the first name was called, and stepping to the score the youth fired.

Kitty ran to the target, marked the shot as directed, and then hurried back to the cover of the tree.

A second name was called and a second shot fired, and was followed by a third, and so on until the last one on the lists had shot.

Then there was a general rush for the target by the contestants and the spectators to learn the result.

It was found that Kitty had done her work well and Gardette complimented her for it.

There were few poor shots in the whole, but it was soon seen that the three best shots, numbers "three" "nine" and "thirteen," or in other words, John West, Dolph Hill and Albert Meek, had tied.

And Major Gardette at once decided that the tie must be shot off at two hundred and fifty paces.

So everybody fell back to his and her place filled with the greatest eagerness and suspense.

John West was the first to shoot. As before, Kitty ran out and marked the shot. Albert Meek followed. Dolph Hill's name was called, and he stepped to the score with the air of one full of self-confidence. He raised his rifle and took a steady aim, but before he touched the trigger a wild shriek smote the ear of every one, and at the same moment all saw a hideously painted savage mounted upon a fine, spirited horse, dash from the dense woods beyond the target alongside of Kitty Hamlin and, scarcely checking the

speed of his horse, he leaned far over and throwing his arm about the terrified girl's waist lifted her from the ground, and dashed on with her struggling in his power.

A cry of horror burst from every lip.

"Shoot the devil, Hill!" cried Minkskin Mike. "I dare not try—I'll kill Kitty," replied the startled marksman, lowering his rifle.

But before the last word had fallen from Hill's lips, Minkskin Mike threw his rifle to his shoulder, leaped upon a fallen tree-trunk, and over the heads of the almost panic-stricken crowd fired at the now swiftly retreating savage.

A yell of mortal agony was mingled with the sharp crack of the young borderman's rifle; the daring savage was seen to reel and then fall from his horse with his captive in his arms.

A shout of mingled joy and fear burst from the lips of the crowd as it ran toward the fallen savage; but the cry was soon turned to a moan of distress and sorrow, and Randolph Hill, who had been first to reach the side of the dead Indian and his captive, turned, and with his face black with passion and a pistol in his hand, made his way back through the crowd until he met Minkskin Mike before whom he stopped, and pointing the pistol at the young borderman's heart, hissed out:

"Curse you, Minkskin Mike! You have murdered Kitty Hamlin!"

CHAPTER II.

OLD COLUMBIA JIM PUTS IN.

MINKSKIN MIKE was unmoved by the words and threatening attitude of Dolph Hill, but looking him squarely in the eye he said in a tone, firm and resolute:

"I did no such a thing."

"Tell me I lie?" fairly shrieked the excited Hill; "did I not just come from her side? Scoundrel, you shall!"

"Hurrah! hurrah!" suddenly broke forth the stentorian voice of old Major Gardette, "Kitty's not dead! She's not even hurt—only fainted! Hurrah for Minkskin Mike, the boss shot of the Minnesota Valley!"

"Hear that?" demanded Mike of the wrathful fellow before him; "put up your pistol and hide yourself, now; go off and kick yourself for bein' a fool."

Dolph Hill's face assumed a different look—almost of disappointment; and as he put away his pistol he was shoved aside by two brawny settlers who rushed to where Mike stood, and, lifting the boy on their shoulders, bore him between them to where Kitty, just out of her swoon, stood leaning upon her father's arm.

"Here he is!" shouted one of the men; "here's the young dare-devil, crack shot, sharpshooter o' the Northwest! This is the lad that fired the shot that tumbled the red-skin that captered you, Kitty!"

Kitty lifted her pretty eyes to the confused face of her young rescuer, and in words audible only to those near, she thanked him for his promptness in saving her, and finally declared him, in her opinion, the champion shot of the day.

It was found that the savage, whom Mike recognized as Dashing Dust, had been shot through the head. It was truly a remarkable shot, for the savage was going at a sweeping gallop; but it was one of Minkskin's characteristic performances.

For the time being he was the hero of the hour. It was true, the shooting match was concluded, but with little enthusiasm.

The tie shot was won by Albert Meek, much to the mortification of Dolph Hill, who had been all unnerved by the excitement consequent upon the attempted abduction of Kitty and his own foolishness.

After the shooting was over, Kitty's father, Mr. Newcomb, and others discussed with Mike the events of the day, and especially the attempted abduction of Kitty.

"Folks," said the young sharpshooter, "this may be the beginning o' your troubles, and from this on you may look out for dangers. That Ingin is that terrible wretch Dashin'-Dust, who won his name by just such acts as dashin' into the camp of a hostile tribe and shootin' a chief or pickin' up a child or girl and ridin' away. But he's made one dash too many. But, folks, I was goin' to tell you to look out that there's no traitors in your own camp!"

"Why, do you think there are, Mike?" asked Mr. Hamlin.

"I'm suspicious," replied the boy; "the big war now goin' on in the South will furnish the Indian camps and white settlements with cowards, renegades and deserters, who will not hesitate to do anything. It seems to me the

white visitors around the Indian village are trying to furnish the savages an excuse for digging up the hatchet, and even the movements of this now dead savage might have been to provoke you to follow him into an ambuscade. It may be that his death will call for the life-blood of some one, but if so, I'm the one to settle with, and they can have my hair when they get around to it. My advice is for you to hurry home and git everything in a bang-up shape for defense."

This advice was acted upon at once. The young hunter was invited to accompany them home, but he declined. He said he was to be at home that evening, for some of his old-time boy companions were to be there; but he promised the settlers that he would keep an eye on the Indian village and promptly report any suspicious movements he might detect.

As the young trapper was about to depart Kitty Hamlin advanced to where he stood, and looking into his eyes with an expression of gratefulness and admiration, said:

"Mike, when you come to the village you must not fail to visit our house."

"Thank you; I'll be only too glad to visit you, Kitty. So, good-by." And with a light footstep and a lighter heart the gallant youth turned his back upon the applauding settlers and moved briskly away.

He went northward along the river, and as he proceeded along his mind was busied with pleasant thoughts—thoughts of pretty Kitty Hamlin and his great triumph over the insolent Dolph Hill. He made up his mind finally to devote his services from that time until all dangers were past to the settlers of Pine Valley. The first thing he resolved to do after reaching his cabin was to pack his traps and outfit and conceal them. Then he would take to the woods in the vicinity of the Indian village and watch every movement of the savages. Should the friends he was expecting come he would try and enlist them in his service, for he knew them to be brave and trusty boys.

Having thus decided upon his future course he hurried on. Some five miles from Pine Valley he came to a little opening, across which ran the trail he was following. With a quick step he started across this opening, glancing warily around him as he did so. When near the center of the glade a voice suddenly cried out:

"Halt there!"

Mike quickly came to a halt, dropping his rifle into the hollow of his left arm as he did so, and glancing in the direction whence the command came.

To his surprise and fear he beheld the muzzle of a musket thrust through a cluster of vines and bushes and pointed straight at his breast; but he could see only the faintest outlines of the man behind it.

"Drop that rifle!" again commanded that imperative voice behind the leveled rifle.

Mike hesitated, when the unknown again thundered out:

"Drop that gun, I say, or by the eternal gods, I'll drop you where you stand, you murderous imp!"

"No you don't!" suddenly exclaimed an unknown voice from the opposite side of the glade. "Take some one o' yer size," and at the same instant a rifle rung out, a yell of agony burst from the lips of Mike's unseen foe, who sprung forward through the bushes and fell motionless on his face at the edge of the thicket.

Then Mike turned to see who it was that had rendered him such opportune service, and to his surprise he saw a little old man, dressed in a complete set of buckskin, and carrying a rifle, whose muzzle was still smoking, advancing toward him, his tobacco-stained lips wreathed in a broad, bland smile.

"Yaw! haw! haw!" the old fellow finally burst out; "I'll larn sich varmints to take sumthin' o' th'ir size next time, won't I? Got the deadfall on ye, didn't he, my little pilgrim?"

"Yes, he did," replied Mike, and though he was sober and serious enough a minute before, he could not help smiling at the old stranger's whimsical remarks, especially about the unknown for taking some one of his size, for the old fellow was not as large as Mike himself. "But," Mike went on, "I'm much obliged to you for that timely shot—it let me out of a close corner."

"I should asseverate that it did. You war bein' closely and sorely and tumultuously chased in spirit. The bush-ranger had you foul, and spoke up peart and vitr'olish-like, as though he meant to salt you. He war some cussed renegade, too cowardly to hunt full-grow' folks, but goes a-gunnin' for children. Whar d'ye

live, boy? What's yer name? Are ye lost, strayed or stolen?"

"I live all alone up the river, and am a hunter and trapper. My name is Minkskin Mike."

"Whew!" whistled the old nomad, gazing around at the tree-tops in feigned surprise. "I'll proclaim that I've hearn o' Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter, afore, but I allers s'posed he war a little boy that war the hero in a fairy story, and used arrows made o' sunbeams to shoot hummin' birds, and balanced on one foot on blades o' grass, and drunk mornin' dew out o' flower-cups."

"Well, you see you are mistaken, don't you? But say, old stranger, it seems to me you're a queer mess," said Mike, in a jovial way; "who might you be, anyhow?"

"My name is James Muchmore, but much less I've been familiarly known in some parts for nighly forty years more or less, as Old Columbia Jim, hunter and trapper, bear-tamer and Ingin-paralyzer. I hearn that the Ingins war on the rampage, and so I come over here to have a dip into the puddle. Boy, I'm Co-lumbia Jeems, and I'm on the war-path till ye can't rest."

"I'm glad you come, Columbia," said Mike, "for I reckon you saved my life; and you did the work for that critter out there in a bumfusicated style."

"Oh, but if you'd only 'sociate with me awhile, boy, you'd find out that I war a hull litter o' jaguars, a den of lions, a drove of bebe-moths, a swarm o' double-javelined bumble-bees; but let us take a look at that critter yander."

So saying, the newly-made friends advanced to where the unknown foe fell, but to their complete astonishment they found no lifeless body. The foe was gone, and an examination of the ground revealed blood on the grass and leaves. They saw where the fellow had fallen—where he had dragged himself into the woods unobserved by the hunters. A few rods further along this bloody trail they found the unknown's rifle. Here they saw he had risen to his feet. They tracked him on a ways to where a horse had been hitched, and upon which he had, after all, made his escape.

"Ramshorn o' Egypt!" exclaimed old Columbia Jim, with a look of disappointment on his weather-beaten face, "the varmint's gone, and the next time he gits a drop on you he'll fetch you a-flukin'. I aimed to put a bullet through his gastronomy, but as I couldn't see him I reckon I jist chipped off one corner. But ghost o' Pocahontas! how the varmint has leaked blood!—been a white man, too!"

"Yes," responded Minkskin, "I know that he was by his voice—some old renegade, I presume."

"Well, he'll not be serviceable soon, if ever," said Old Columbia, "but you want to look out—keep eyes skinned and ears open, or you'll be found starin' into the sky some fine mornin'."

"Well, I'm going to my cabin, and I don't propose to be skeered out before I'm run out," was the rejoinder.

"You've got the sand, boy—the real Muchmore grit, and if you keep erect you'll git there on a big name, some day. But say, d'ye want to adopt a boy?—a real, sprightly, hearty, full-grown rooster nigh on to fifty years old?"

"Be you that boy's grandfather?" asked Minkskin, indulging in an outburst of laughter.

"I'm that boy, himself."

"Then come along, and I'll do the best I can by you," said Mike, glad enough to accept him as a companion.

"But lookey here; are you o' good, moral habits? Do you smoke, chew, gamble, drink, or run bosses?"

"No," with a smile.

"D'ye lie any?"

"No."

"Then I'll go with you. If thar's any thing I can't stand it is a feller alers beginn' tobakker o' me, or groanin' for my last drop o' whisky, or that can tell a bigger yarnification than I can."

With this understanding the two set off up the river, and in the due course of time they arrived at the cabin of the boy hunter—a little log-cabin on the banks of the river with a grassy opening around it.

"Now, Columbia Jim," said Mike when they had entered the cabin, "take off your things and make yerself to home, and I'll knock together a late dinner for I'm hungry as a bear, and 'spect you are, too."

"Right, boy, I'm holler from skull to boots—can eat ye outen house and home—hav'n't had a bite to eat for a week 'cept one lone, little cub bear, two fawns and six measly little squirrels."

Mike soon had a sumptuous meal ready, when the two sat down and partook heartily; in the mean time, however, old Jim's tongue ran incessantly—a mouthful of food being no impediment to his speech.

After the repast was finished Jim produced a pipe, filled and lit it and indulged in a quiet smoke—content to let Minkskin do the talking for the time being.

Toward evening, while Mike was busily engaged in packing up and concealing his traps, old Jim took his rifle and strolled off up the river on a reconnaissance.

Mike became so busily engaged with his work, as well as the thoughts of his victory at Pine Valley, that he took no note of the passing hours until the shadows of night began to gather. Then it occurred to him that old Jim had not returned, still he felt no uneasiness for the old borderman; but when darkness had fully set in, and the sullen voice of the river, and the nocturnal sounds of the dark woods became mingled in one dreary song, a vague foreboding filled his breast.

The more he brooded over the absence of his friends the more restless he became. Was it possible, he asked himself, that Jim had lost his way in the night? Had he met with trouble, or had he gone off with the intention of remaining away? If the latter, then he had been deceived in the man; but he could not convince himself that Columbia Jim was a bad man, so he finally made up his mind that the old fellow was in some kind of trouble, and taking up his rifle, he stepped out into the night and started off up the river in search of his old friend.

CHAPTER III.

A CONFERENCE OF VILLAINS.

"Tu-whit-tu-whoo! Tu-whit-tu-whoo-oo-o!" The sound rung in startling echoes through the stillness of darksome woods, and the old owl that uttered it crept from his hole in the great oak, and perching himself upon a limb peered around to see that the coast was clear—for see he could, for the gloom was his element. Beneath him almost flowed the river. Back of him rose densely-wooded hills.

A gentle breeze stirred the foliage into a soft rustle; the crickets chirruped everywhere; tree-frogs piped their rasping notes, insect wings droned through the air. Nature seemed in her happiest mood; and yet the old owl seemed to hesitate, arched his head and ruffled his feathers uneasily, and finally turned and hopped back into his hiding-place in the tree, and with his big, staring eyes looked out and down at the moving forms of five human beings—men.

They are approaching from up the river. They advance and halt under the great oak. Seating themselves, they talk in subdued tones. Three of them are white men, two are Indians—one of the latter a chief, the other a powerful warrior. There is a sixth form near, though the five know it not. It is a stealthily moving figure—at times gliding from one tree to another, now crouching down, now lying flat on the earth, now moving with ghostly silence closer and closer, until at length it stops at the very foot of the oak, listening to the following conversation of the five:

"Well, Laclede hasn't got here yet, I see."

It is one of the three white men who speaks.

"He'll be here, and don't forget it," replies another; "for the young scamp is on his mettle and bound to win. Yes, he'll be here, even if he doesn't observe dramatic precision as to the minute."

"Yes, the pale-face will come," puts in the chief. "Red Willow has faith in him and his promises. His mind is clear and his tongue is straight."

"Whist, there!" suddenly comes a low call to the ears of the party.

Then there is a momentary silence. The call is repeated, when one of the three white men asks:

"Ho, is it you, Laclede?"

"So it is, my dear Cuthbert Blake," is the response, and then Laclede advances and joins them.

"Well, we were just speaking of you, Jack," says Cuthbert Blake.

"Now you can say it all to my face," chuckled Jack Laclede, as he seats himself, and leans against the tree-trunk.

"Well, what news have you to give this conference?" asks Blake.

"Deuced bad, I can tell you," is Laclede's response; "our plans at the shooting-match were a disastrous failure."

"The furies, you say!" exclaims Blake, and his disappointment is shared by his companions.

"Yes," continues Laclede, "a disastrous fail-

ure; but all would have gone well had it not been for the presence of that pestiferous young demon, Minkskin Mike. Danton and I had everything arranged even nicer than we had anticipated. It so happened that Kitty Hamlin was stationed alone near the target, to act as marker. Not another soul was nearer to her than a hundred yards. Danton stole out into the woods and communicated the fact to Dashing Dust. When the time came the wild Indian horseman made one of his characteristic dashes, and succeeded in getting Kitty into his power, and turned to flee with her, when Minkskin Mike jumped upon a log and made one of his characteristic wing shots, and put a bullet through Dashing Dust's brain."

"Fiends and furies!" cried Blake, with a furious oath, while the chief, Red Willow, grasping his tomahawk, fairly shrieked in demoniac fury:

"The scalp of the boy trapper shall hang at the girdle of Red Willow before another sun kisses the waters of the Minnesota!"

"Ay, he would have been wolf-meat ere this but for another failure," continued Laclede. "After he left Pine Valley for his cabin I sent Danton to intercept him, and put a bullet through his carcass. In a little glade this side of Pine Valley he got the drop on the young imp, but before he got in his work a shot was fired from the opposite side of the glade, and Danton was seriously if not mortally wounded. It was fired by an old, weazened-faced hunter, whom Danton declared was Old Columbia Jim, of Red river notoriety."

"Old Columbia Jim!" exclaimed Blake. "Is it possible that we have got that bloodthirsty, wolfish old fiend to contend with down here? I left the Red river just to escape that sleuth-hound's vengeance, and if he's got in with Minkskin Mike, we have a precious pair of twin devils to buck against. That boy is now acting as scout for the settlers of Pine Valley, and if we'd wish to be successful in any movement, we'd better get rid of that coyote first. But how did Danton escape, Laclede? and where is he now?"

"While the old hunter and Minkskin stood getting acquainted with each other, Danton recovered from the shock that knocked him down, and crawling to his horse, mounted and fled. He's gone to the Indian village for re-pairs."

"And where's Minkskin Mike?"

"He's probably at his cabin, to-night, but hereafter if he's caught it'll be on the run. As near as I could understand from his conversation with the settlers, he is to take the field as scout immediately."

"It's not far to his cabin, and the night is dark," said Blake in a suggestive tone.

"Red Willow and his warrior, Black Elk, are ready to go with the pale-faces to the cabin of the young Quick-Shoot," said the chief.

"All right," agreed Laclede, "and in the light of his burning cabin we can finish our conference."

"Ugh!—still!" suddenly exclaimed the Indian, Black Elk, as he rose to his feet, and leaning forward peered into the darkness.

All was silent as death for several moments, then the Indian uttered a wild war-whoop, and like a huge tiger lunged forward into the gloom.

The sound of a hand-to-hand struggle followed. The warrior, Black Elk, was engaged with an unknown foe whose presence had been detected by the lynx-eyed savage.

Although the moon was up, her light could not penetrate the dense woods where the struggle was going on. This prevented the Indian's friends rendering him any assistance, but this difficulty was soon obviated by the foes whirling out into a moonlit opening where the light enabled them to distinguish the forms of a white man and the savage locked in each other's deadly embrace.

With a yell, Red Willow and Blake leaped forward, and seizing the unknown foe ended the conflict. Black Elk rose to his feet, staggered and fell dead from a knife-thrust in the side. Red Willow uttered a yell of vengeance, and drawing his tomahawk would have buried it in the prisoner's brain but for Blake's interposition.

"Hold on, Red Willow," the white villain commanded, "let us see what we have got here—mebby it's the young cub-devil we want that's been caught so nicely by the bold warrior hanging at our heels."

The unknown arose to his feet, and while Laclede searched his person for weapons, of which he found nothing but the knife that had ended the warrior's existence, Blake struck a match and held it in the prisoner's face.

"By the eternal vengeance!" cried the villain, starting back as if with sudden terror, "it's Old Columbia Jim, the Demon of the Red river!"

"And the murderer of Danton! Crucify him! crucify him!" shouted Jack Laclede.

"Yes, scoundrels," the old captive now said, "I are Ole Columby Jim, at yer service, but please Almighty God, had I not been a fool for on't, I'd not been in this fix. So go yer length, you hounds o' perdition. You've got old Jim, but young Mike you've not got, and mind I tell you he has spotted every man o' you, and there'll be a cramp epidemic break out in this country afore long that'll sweep you critters all into purgatory. Go in, I can afford to die, for I'm most too old for service, though I've done good work in the past."

"The pale-face shall die like a dog!" said Red Willow, "for he comes like a sneakin' cur to listen in the dark to the talk of Red Willow and his friends."

"You remember me, don't you, Jimmy?" asked Blake, in a fierce, vindictive tone; "you remember me as the man whom you and your friends hunted and bounded out of the Red River valley—"

"For horse-stealin'," put in old Jim.

"No matter what for," continued Blake, "it's my turn now, and time hasn't blunted my vengeance one whit. Ha! ha! he laughs best who laughs last. Jim, I had registered an oath that I would sink your living body in the waters of Red river with a stone around your neck—end your existence as I would a worthless dog's. But the Minnesota river will do just as well; and now, my friends,"—and he turned to his companions—"I want your help. Leave his scalp, Red Willow, for to take it would make death by drowning all the more welcome."

"Good! good!" shouted Laclede. "I'll furnish the rope for the work," and hurrying away to where he had left his horse, he brought back a long lariat.

Jim was then conducted to the edge of a high rock projecting high out over the river. He was bound hand and foot; then a stone, weighing fully a hundred pounds, was secured. With the dead Black Elk's tomahawk notches were chipped in the corners of the stone to receive the encircling rope, for the villains were determined that no pains should be spared to make success sure.

"Now, then," said Blake, when the stone was ready, "if you have anyth' to say, Columbia Jim, before departing hence, you'll proceed at once."

"I've nothin' to say more'n what I hope you'll git your dues from Minkskin Mike," replied the undaunted old man.

One end of the rope was now tied around the stone, the other about the thin, scrawny neck of the prisoner. Blake inspected each knot, declaring as he did so:

"I don't intend there shall be any mistake in this matter; but it's all right, boys. Now, one of you take up the stone and I'll take up the hero, and when I say 'Throw' heave overboard the stone."

Whatever of hope old Columbia Jim had entertained up to this moment now vanished. But a few moments now separated him from eternity, yet the brave man faced death with a fearlessness that fairly disappointed his enemies.

Finally, the villain Blake lifted the lithesome form of the prisoner in his arms—Laclede took up the stone. Together the two advanced to the edge of the rock, when Blake shouted:

"Throw!"

Together the old borderman and the stone dropped downward over the rock. There was a groan, mingled with a loud splash, and Columbia Jim was dragged down under the dark waters of the river.

The murderers all advanced to the edge of the rock and peered down into the water. They saw the waves circling outward, and scores of bubbles boiling upward to the surface of the water where the old man went down.

"It's all over with," said Blake, with an air of relief, "though he must be dying hard, the way the bubbles are coming up."

"It's a nice job," said Laclede; "no carcass to stink, no suspicion to be aroused."

"And now for the cabin of Minkskin Mike," said Blake.

The five villains turned, and having covered the body of Black Elk with stones, to keep the wolves from devouring it until they returned, moved away down the river.

Soon their footsteps died away in the distance, and then those strange voices so peculiar to the woods after night began their weird song.

The moon sailed out into a clear sky and the river ran on singing to the sea.

"Tu-whit! tu-whoo! tu-whit! tu-whoo-oo-oo!" again rung through the night, and the crack of the old owl's wings could have been heard on the pliant air as he again emerged from his retreat and plunged out into the shadows on his nocturnal ramble.

CHAPTER IV.

A FRIGHTFUL EXPERIENCE.

OLD Columbia Jim had faced death perhaps a hundred times in his life, and by some kind providence had escaped unharmed, even when escape seemed impossible; and it was this fact that led him to hope for escape from the power of Cuthbert Blake and his minions; and not until the rope was adjusted, until it seemed that no earthly power could save him, did he make up his mind that his time had come.

The old man had often stood by the bedside of a dying man, and as the last moments were breathed away he wondered what change was wrought upon the mind in the spirit's transition from this life to that of the great Hereafter. Even as he was being dragged down into the river, and realized that he was never to breathe another breath of air, that same thought flashed through his brain.

Down into the icy cold depths of the water he sank. A thousand invisible hands seemed pulling at him, a dull, pent-up roaring filled his ears. The sudden pain of strangling was soon over, and then he seemed to float out into another world. A dreamy forgetfulness soothed his brain, and the sound of sweet music filled the surrounding space, seeming to come from the lips and harps of invisible angels. But all of a sudden this Elysian way was overcast with a dark cloud, and a pain as if of a thousand cruel barbs pierced his breast and convulsed his body. And he grew sick, and his head seemed ready to burst, and then for a moment all seemed over with him.

But all was not over, for when Columbia Jim's senses came slowly back, and a few of the scattered links of memory had been gathered together, the old man became firmly settled in his mind that he had awoke in eternity. He saw that he was surrounded by darkness. Before him ran a dark and sullen river. Over him hung a black and starless roof. "Is this the sphere to which I have been assigned? Am I to dwell here alone through all time to come?" were the thoughts that were suggested to his mind; and as he sat on the echoless shore meditating upon them he suddenly discovered a dark form at his side, felt the touch of a hand upon his shoulder. Starting back with horror, he cried out:

"Who be you? who be you?"

"Sh, Jim! the devils will hear," were the words of caution given by the unknown, though they sounded low and sepulchral.

"Sh, Jim, the devils 'll hear," muttered Old Jim to himself; "that settles it. I'm in eternal damnation—close to the Old Scratch's dominion—mustn't speak loud or he'll hear me. Well, well, Jim Muchmore, if you've got to live all through eternity on the frontiers of hell, and not a very bad man at that when on earth, surely such villains as Blake and Laclede will be given a furnace at white heat in the very metropolis o' purgatory. But I wonder who I've got for a companion? Wonder if it's anybody I knowed on earth?"

"It's me, Jim—Minkskin Mike," replied the form at his side, for Old Jim's thoughts had found expression in words.

"Minkskin Mike? bah! don't try, Mr. Spirit, to work yourself off on me for Minkskin Mike," retorted the transported hunter.

"Why, Jim, you're out of your head; where do you think you are, old pard?"

"Why, in eternity," answered Jim; "I was drowned, and my spirit has taken its abode here; but you're not Minkskin Mike—you can't play shenanigan on me, if I am a new-comer here, and don't you forget it."

"Why, Jim, you're away off on your locality. I tell you I am Minkskin Mike, and we're both on earth."

"On earth? d'ye mean to tell me that I wasn't drowned by Cuthbert Blake and his men?" asked Old Jim, gazing around him in bewilderment.

"I do, Jim," was the reply; "I heard the racket when they took you in, and crawling closer, I soon learned what they intended to do with you, and while they were getting ready I crept down under this rock, and when they

yanked you into the river I dived down and found you, and cutting you loose from the stone, dragged you to the surface close up under this rock, where the outlaws couldn't see."

"And you're Minkskin Mike?"

"Yes."

"The Boy Sharpshooter?"

"Yes."

"Well, by the eternal stars! I'm beginnin' to see through things now. I have passed through the ordeal of death and resurrection, and my Lord, Mike! what a horrible, terrible experience! But give me your hand, boy; I'd thought all along that I weren't ready to die for good, and yet I can't hardly realize that I'm on earth—that you, a boy, could do such a great thing as you have done. Why, that water there's a thousand feet deep, if it's a foot."

"Only about fifteen feet deep, Jim," said Mike, for he it was; "but then you arn't acquainted with me—don't know that I'm almost as much at home in the water as a fish."

"Well, I'm livin' and learnin'," confessed the old man, resting his head against the rock; "and now we're even, Mikey; I shot to save you, and you dived to save me. But whar's them fiends that dumped me?"

"They left three solid hours ago for the cabin of Minkskin Mike, but they won't find him at home. You see, I've had a big time gittin' the breath started up in you, and there was a time when I thought you'd winked out. But if you feel able, we'd better try and get out from here."

"All right, Mike; pull out and I'll follow."

Although sick and weak, the old man, with Mike's help, succeeded in getting out into the woods. Here by repeated efforts he succeeded in getting his lungs cleared of water, but he was still unable to travel, and when it became apparent that he could not return to the cabin that night Mike left him in a cluster of bushes, hurried back to his cabin, stole into it, and securing a flask of brandy and some provision, returned to his friend, having seen or heard nothing of his enemies.

That night and the following day were passed in the seclusion of the woods, and by the time night had again set in Old Jim had regained his wonted strength and spirit, and having recovered his trusty rifle and pistols from where he had left them when he became a spy at the conference under the oak, he declared himself again upon the war-path.

As the two proceeded homeward under cover of the night they observed the greatest precaution, for they knew that Blake and his followers would never cease pursuing Mike until he was dead or out of their way.

The interview at the oak, as heard by Old Jim, left no doubt in Mike's mind that there were traitors among the settlers at Pine Valley, and that the villains Danton and Laclede were known at the settlement by other names.

"It seems there is no escaping an Indian war," Mike finally remarked; "it will be a bloody one, too, for there are so many settlers exposed. I have five young friends that were to have been at my cabin last night, and if they come we are 'oin' gunnin' for red-skins. Every one of them's a crack shot, brave as a Crusader, and full of fun and frolic. I tell you what, we six'll make the old woods hum, and—"

"We seven, Mike," interrupted Old Jim, "don't forget to count me in with the boys. I'm old, I know, but I'm a hull mule team on the war-path."

"All right, Jim; excuse me; we seven it shall be."

Thus the two conversed until they came within sight of the cabin. They had a strong suspicion that the place was being watched, and what was their surprise to discover a light in the building as they approached nearer.

"By snakes!" exclaimed the boy, "they've taken possession, and are awaiting my coming."

"Hark! they're havin' a Belshazzar frolic, too," said Old Jim.

They listened. They heard outbursts of rollicking laughter come from the cabin.

"Bless me! I do believe," said Mike, "that my boy friends have come, and have taken possession, and are making themselves at home."

"Think so? Want to be sure, Mike, before we bulge in."

"I'll see, anyhow: wait here, Jim, and if I whistle it'll be all right, and you can come up; if not, I'll return to you."

So saying, Mike crept noiselessly away, and approached the cabin door. But before he was close enough to see any one inside, he recognized the voices of his friends, and giving a sharp whistle, he bounded forward and into the cabin.

Five young men, or rather boys, whose ages ranged from seventeen to twenty, greeted him with a shout.

"Hurrah! hallelujah!" exclaimed Mike; "you're on hand, my old friends, at last, and I am rejoiced! How's your health, Sam Moshier?" and he grasped his friend's hand. "Bless your black eyes, Nick Parsons! Put her there, Blackhawk Tom! Glad to meet you, my dear 'Squinty,' and you, too, Bigfoot Ben! Here, come in here, Columbia Jim, and let me introduce you to those boys. I was telling you of a few minutes ago."

The old borderman entered the cabin and was introduced to all the boys, after which a general conversation ensued. For the time being, Indians and outlaws were forgotten, but presently old Jim rose and went out to look around. He'd been gone but a few minutes, when a wild, unearthly yell rose on the night.

"By snakes!" exclaimed Mike, "old Jim's in a muss!" and seizing his rifle he hurried out into the darkness, followed by his friends. By this time all had become quiet save the approach of hasty footsteps.

"Halt there!" cried Mike, raising his gun.

"That you, Mike?" asked the party challenged—old Jim.

"Yes. What demoniac yell was that?" asked the boy.

"I've been raisin' Helen Blazes," was Jim's reply. "A red-skin got his head in my way and I peeled his whole top knot off—raised the fust hair o' the season."

He led the way into the cabin, and in the light he revealed the gory scalp-lock of a savage, true enough.

"I caught the varlet snookin' round the premises, and layin' for him I bu'sted his snoot with a club, and then avalanched the pride of his manhood, his skulp. Now, if I can git my fingers into the lock o' that chief, Red Willow, and Cuthbert Blake, and Jack Laclede, I'll be ready to depart this life in peace. Boys, I'm on the war-path! I'm mad, wild, intoxicated! I've had the taste of blood, and from this on I'll be wuss nor a Texas steer on a rampage, and—"

"Oh, what a holy snorter!" suddenly interrupted a voice at the door. "What a great, untamed pestilence! What a pretty destroyin' angel! What a bellyache epidemic!"

These words were uttered by the voice of a stranger who, unobserved till he spoke, had entered the door where he now stood, with his hat in one hand and his rifle in the other.

Instantly every eye was fastened upon the bold intruder, who proved to be a boy not over eighteen years of age. He was rather small, yet his form was peculiarly and remarkably developed for one of his age. He was as slender as a young grayhound—his long, slim neck, upon which was set a round, bullet-head, the hair closely cut, being fully exposed, as was also half of his breast and shoulders. The collar and bosom of his shirt was thrown wide and carelessly open. His eyes were small, black and keen as a ferret's, one of them having a kind of squint that gave him a rather comical expression. His face was tanned to a nut-brown. His nose was the most prominent feature of his face, being quite large and most decidedly Roman.

Old Columbia Jim was the first to address the young stranger.

"Moly Hoses!" he exclaimed, "who be you? Whar on earth did you pop from? Is the darkness o' this night full o' boys?"

"I'm a traveler huntin' the cabin of Minkskin Mike," replied the strange youth.

"This is the place, and Minkskin Mike's myself, stranger," said the young sharpshooter, advancing toward the new-comer.

"And this is me, and I'm his twin brother. Stranger, if we war born forty years apart," put in Old Jim.

"Well, at any rate, I'm a hunter-boy," said the stranger, "an' hearin' as what the Ingins war 'bout to take the war-path, I concluded to come down and help the settlers. I come over from the Missouri."

"You're welcome under my roof, stranger," said Mike. "These boys here just come in tonight, and they, too, are going to help amuse the red-skins."

"Boys!" said the new arrival, pointing to Old Jim; "d'ye call that antequated antediluvian a boy? Ha! ha! ha!"

"See here, my young kid," said Old Jim, "you appear to be as mean as a squint-eyed mule. Mebbe you don't like my style?"

The boy burst into a peal of laughter that thrilled the veins of his auditors and set them to laughing too. They were fully satisfied now

that the boy was as good-natured, rollicking and witty as he was odd.

"What might be yer name, stranger?" Mike finally asked.

"Oh, most anything yer a mind to call me. My father's name war Bates, and—"

"Then we'll call you 'Posey Bates,'" said Old Jim.

"All right," said the boy, and the matter was settled.

"Well, 'Posey,' make yourself at home now," said Mike, "for we are glad to have you with us. Been on the border long?"

"Ever since I war knee-high to a toad," replied Posey, tossing his hat into one corner, setting aside his rifle and unbuckling his belt; "but it war'n't good Ingin-pickin' over whar I war, and so I pulled out. I've had my eye on a scalp all evening, and if it hadn't been for that old tuditinancy, I'd 'a' had that very top-knot that he got. But there'll be a plenty of chances now, for the red-skins are on the move. As I come down in sight of the Indian village to-day a band of two hundred or more warriors in war-paint war jist leavin', and I'll bet a frog-skin they war marchin'—"

"On Pine Valley," put in Minkskin Mike. "Boys, some one must go to the settlement and put the people there on their guard, and since I'm better acquainted with the way, I'm the chap to go, and will start at once. Boys, you all want to make yerselves at home until I return. You'll find flour in that box, meat in the cellar. If I get through safe, I'll be back soon, but if anything happens that I don't get around by to-morrow night, come down to the settlement. If the red-skins should come 'round inquirin' for me, give 'em my compliments in way of cold lead through their carcasses."

"Bet we will, Mike," said Posey Bates.

In a few minutes Mike was ready and departed on his mission. Old Jim went out with him to make a reconnaissance, for he could not dismiss the belief that other Indians than the one he had found were lurking around.

The other boys now sat down, some on the floor, some on chairs, and entered into conversation. Posey Bates became the center of attraction not only on account of his whimsical humor but his general intelligence.

"Posey" finally asked Blackhawk Tom, "Did you ever run across that feller up the Missouri called Cyclone Charlie?"

"I should say that I had, Tom," replied Posey; "I've known that little imp for scads of years—he's a boy, too, 'bout my age."

"They say he's one of the gamest young roosters that ever ruffled a feather," observed Sam Moshier.

"He's like most other boys, unless he beats 'em in double-distilled ugliness and chirpin' out o' his mouth. Cyclone's an awful gabby mess."

"How came he to be called Cyclone Charlie, do ye know, Posey?"

"I should say I did—heard the imp tell it a thousand times, I'll bet. Why, I can sing it, I've heard it so often."

"Tell us; tell us the story," exclaimed the boys, "for we have heard so much of Cyclone Charlie that we want to know how he got his name."

"Well," began Posey, "the way the boy got his handle war this: two years ago last June Charlie was acting as camp-guard for a party of surveyors in Northwest Nebraska. The Ingins were not very friendly them days, but the worst they'd attempt to do was to steal. One day Charlie caught an Ingin and a white renegade trying to steal some horses belonging to his party, and he ups and shot the renegade dead and wounded the Ingin. The surveyors applauded him for the act, but never dreamed that it would lead to further trouble. Two days afterward, when Charlie was left alone, a dozen Ingins led by a villainous white wretch, a brother of the one the boy'd shot, swept down upon him and took him a prisoner, but not before he'd laid out two of them. They beat and pounded him around in a shameful manner, and finally the renegade suggested that they bury him alive. A pistol-shot or a knife-thrust would a-done the work, but there would be more hellish satisfaction in buryin' him alive, and make the boy dig his own grave at that."

"Procuring a spade belonging to the camp they put him to work. As the day was hot and sultry it made the lad sweat, for although the camp was in the edge of the grove they put him to work on the edge of the prairie in the boiling sun."

"The thoughts that filled that boy's mind as he shoveled out the dirt from his own grave wasn't at all inspirin', as you may imagine. But he had to dig away, and if he dared to stop a mo-

ment to rest or dared to look around him—as he did once in hopes of seeing his friends returning—a punch in the ribs or slap in the face would admonish him that he must not cease working. But while he appeared to work hard he dallied considerable in hopes o' prolongin' the crisis. Two savages stood over him for two hours while the others plundered camp, drank whisky from the surveyors' keg, and raised Cain in general.

"Bout four o'clock the sun disappeared behind a cloud. Charlie dared to lift his eyes and glance westward as he threw a shovelful of dirt out of the grave. He seen the sky was piled full of the awfulest black-green clouds he'd ever beheld, and a few moments later he heard the wind roarin' high in the heavens above him. He knew a fearful storm was comin', and he mentally prayed that it'd hurry up his friends. The Indians noticed the storm comin', but they had possession of camp—were getting roarin' drunk, and so what cared they for wind and rain? But they finally began to hurry Charlie up, and at last the renegade decided the hole was deep enough, and called for ropes with which to bind the lad hand and foot. Before the ropes were procured a strange, roarin' noise fell upon Charlie's ears, and darin' to look westward, he, as well as his captors, saw an awful sight. It was a black thing hangin' out o' the clouds o' heaven. At the top where it joined the clouds it was large, but it grew smaller as it approached the ground. It was comin' right toward camp, too, and it was comin' fast; and the nearer it came the louder it roared, the more vivid the lightnin' flashed and the fiercer the thunder crashed.

"Charlie's pony was lariated out to grass a few hundred paces from camp, and when that black funnel-shaped cloud reached the pony it snatched the critter up into its embrace as though it war a feather, and that was the last of that pony.

"The Ingins, as well as Charlie, saw it, and they knew what it meant, drunk as the most of them were. They forgot Charlie in their terror, and running into the tents, threw themselves upon the earth. The boy threw himself on his back at full length in his grave, and awaited results. They soon came. The cyclone went waltzing right through camp. The first thing the boy seen after layin' down was a big tent go flapping and twisting into the air. Then a red-skin was shot across his vision and demolished, while half-a-dozen more went straddlin' into the sky all in a mix with tents, trees, limbs, pots, pans, dirt and dust. Oh, it was a wild, roarin' ripper! Charlie was slossed about in his grave like thunderation, and for awhile it seemed that he'd be sucked out of it and mixed with the Ingins. But he wasn't, and in a few moments the cyclone had passed on, and was followed by a fearful torrent of rain, that drowned Charlie out o' his grave. But when he got out there was no camp in which to take refuge and shelter. The cyclone'd mowed a path acros; the plain and through the timber, and the edges of this path were strewn with debris. Every tree and bush in the storm's way had been twisted and wrenched off, and torn to pieces. The camp was completely obliterated—not even a shre i was left. Not an Ingin could be seen then, dead or alive.

"Running across the storm's path, which was not over twenty rods wide, Charlie sought shelter under a big tree, and here he set for another hour, while the lightnin' licked the sky, the thunder banged, boomed and crashed, and the rain fell in perfect sheets. The very earth seemed to shake from Nebraska to Jericho. But finally the storm ceased, and in a few minutes the sun came out in the western sky, smilin' as blandly as though it looked not on the path of death and desolation. Two bright rainbows spanned the eastern sky and arched the fearful gap torn through the woods by the storm.

"As it cleared off Charlie could see even from where he sat portions of the tents hanging in trees along the path of the cyclone. A little further on he saw the lifeless form of a savage impaled on a sharp snag and not far from it another form hung in the crotch of a tree. On the earth a few rods from camp he saw what looked like monster worms, but upon examination found that they were the bodies of dead Ingins incrusted in mud. Oh, it was a fearful, dreadful storm, and it looked as though the Lord bad somethin' to do with savin' Charlie. The grave that was dug for his destruction was his salvation, while the Ingins were teetotally discomborated.

"Well, when Charlie's friends come in that night unharmed and found the boy settin' there

and every vestige of camp gone they were all broke up; and when Charlie told them the whole story from beginnin' to end, they were astounded. They voted the boy a hero, presented him with the best rifle in the outfit, and gave him the name of Cyclone Charlie and the name's hung to him ever since, and that's the whole story of how he won that handle."

"A big story to believe," remarked "Squinty" Baker, "I'll swan it is. D'you believe it yourself, Bates?"

"Believe it?" replied "Posey," "to be sure I do, for I was there and seen it all."

"Seen it all? How's that?"

"Why, I'm that very boy, myself."

"What! you Cyclone Charlie?"

"I'm Cyclone Charlie or you may shoot me where I set."

"Well, I'll be hurricaned!" exclaimed Sam Moshier, "you young rascal, give me your hand and—"

Before he had finished the sentence a footstep sounded on the threshold of the cabin door, and the next moment four white men and three hideously painted Indians stood within the room with revolvers and rifles covering the breasts of the six boys!

CHAPTER V.

CYCLONE CHARLIE "CUTS A CAPER."

THE boys had been completely taken by surprise, so deeply interested had they been in the story of Cyclone Charlie. Not one of them had a weapon within reach except a knife, and this, in the face of those deadly rifles and revolvers, would be useless. The youths had never dreamed of such an intrusion. They fancied they were entirely safe from a sudden surprise for Old Columbia Jim was outside on the alert. How the foe had eluded his vigilance they could not conceive.

The four white intruders were Cuthbert Blake and his men and one of the savages was Red Willow. They had doubtless come there to take the life of Minkskin Mike, and were not a little surprised themselves to find so many boys in the cabin. Blake ran his snakish eyes around the room, and then he fixed them upon one of the boys whose breast he had covered with a revolver, and hissed out:

"The first dog of a boy that moves is a dead one!"

"Seeing they were entrapped—that they had no show in the presence of a superior number of armed foes, they possessed the presence of mind not to precipitate a massacre by any rash act, but remained quiet. Cyclone Charlie, to the surprise of his friends, assumed a look of almost abject fear, and in a tone half-pleading he asked:

"What have we done that you want to act so cross with us?"

"Where is Minkskin Mike, you little wall-eyed coward?" thundered Blake, ferociously.

"He's gone to the settlement," replied the stupid-looking boy.

"You're lyin'!" retorted Blake.

"Deed and double—pon honor, he has; I hope I may die if I ain't tellin' the truth—ain't I boys?"

"Yes," replied the youths, disgusted at Cyclone Charlie's cowardly conduct.

"What are you young bucks doing here?" asked Blake.

"Met to have some fun, and visit Mike," answered Cyclone.

"I understand that; but do you know that your game is to be nipped in the bud? Which one of you murdered an Indian to night and scalped him?"

"Wasn't me, sir, I'll swear," quickly declared Cyclone.

"Nor me, nor me," declared the others.

"Then it was Minkskin Mike," said Blake, with a grin upon his red, brutal face, "and unless you tell us truthfully where he is, or produce him forthwith, we'll murder every one of you right here. Do you understand?"

"We've told you the truth—he's gone to Pine Valley," said Charlie, "and if you kill us we will haunt you. Don't you know when you kill folks in the full of the moon their ghosts will haunt you?"

"Boy," said Blake, in a tone full of determination, "I'll give you just three minutes to tell us where Minkskin Mike is concealed."

The seven allies stood with their backs to the door, their eyes fixed upon the boys, their revolvers leveled, and tomahawks raised. Some of the young bordermen were sitting, some lying down. Cyclone Charlie was standing, having arisen as the enemy came in.

Before the allies and behind the boys was a

small open window, and at this opening a low sound was heard like some one gasping for breath.

Involuntarily the allies turned their eyes from the boys to the open window, and as they did so a cry of terror escaped Cuthbert Blake's lips, for out of the darkness beyond the open window appeared an apparition that sent the villain fairly reeling backward with a white, terror-blanchéd face, while Red Willow uttered a low cry of abject fear. It was the face of Columbia Jim, who was known only to Blake and the chief, and these two wretches believed that they were confronted by the ghost of the old borderman whom they had helped to consign to a watery grave.

Blake's eyes which had hitherto been fixed upon Cyclone Charlie were now staring wildly on the supposed apparition at the window, and the revolver which had hitherto covered the boy's breast dropped out of line of his body in a trembling hand. Cyclone was not slow to notice this fact and the instant he did his head shot downward, his hands touched the floor, his heels swept over through the air and were planted with such terrific force in the renegade's face as to send him reeling half stunned through the open door to the earth outside.

At the same instant almost a pistol flashed in the open window and Red Willow sunk down like an ox in the shambles dead.

Cyclone Charlie made another whirl through the air and drove his nimble heels into the face of another renegade.

Crack! went Old Jim's second pistol—a yell rose from the lips of Sam Moshier and his friends and ere the foe were scarcely aware of the situation the tables had been turned upon them and those that were not slain outright barely escaped into the woods under cover of the darkness.

Cuthbert Blake was one of the four that got away, though several random shots were fired after him with unknown results.

Shouts of triumph pealed from the lips of the victors and rung defiantly through the night.

"By the boomin' thunders!" exclaimed Old Jim as they again assembled in the cabin, "that war a bit the slickest job I've seen since Parson Jones slipped on the ice and ripped out an oath that made the ice smoke. I witnessed the triumphant march o' them critters to the cabin and I hurried round to have a hand in the frolic. Oh, sweet Helen Blazes! how the tables war flopped—and that Bates boy's a bad article—struck 'em like a young, double-breasted cyclone—he's wusser nor a gymnasticuss the way he slapped his heels into them people's faces—never see'd a man stand on his head and fight 'ith his feet afore, and—"

"That's Cyclone Charlie, himself, Jim," broke in Blackhawk Tom.

"Don't say? Well, I believe it. I'm ready to believe anything 'bout that boy. Helen Blazes! what a team of paralyzers we be on the war-path—wuss nor a hull season o' hurricanes—a herd o' brindle bulls goin' for a red flag—a hull litter o' hydrophobiaed catamounts. But larks, let me tell you that things will smoke from this time on, and as soon as Minkskin Mike returns we'd better be makin' for the open wood where we can have more elbow room. I'm on the war-path and when I get sot agoin' like that Bates boy, it takes space for me to operate in. If we work together, and we will, we must let Minkskin Mike be our boss and guide for he knows every foot o' all this kentry. Oh, sweet clover! what a band o' gallant Boy Sharpshooters we'll be! and how we'll make these ole woods hum-m-m."

Meanwhile Minkskin Mike was pushing on toward Pine Valley. Being swift of foot and possessing a remarkable endurance he passed rapidly over the miles. He was following an old Indian trail that led through the valley from within a mile of his cabin directly through and far beyond Pine Valley. He was not many miles from his destination when the sound of hoof-strokes fell upon his practiced ear. He stopped to listen. The horse was approaching. He stepped aside into the bushes where he could command a view of a little opening across which ran the trail.

A horse soon appeared from the deep shadows in the moonlit opening. It carried a double burden—two females.

Stepping from his covert, Mike demanded:

"Who goes there?"

The horse quickly lifted its head and sniffed the air with alarm. Then it came to a stand. Its riders manifested great uneasiness. Mike recognized them both. One was Kitty Hamlin and the other Alice Walton, of Pine Valley,

and startled by their presence there at that time of night, he soon decided on the course he would pursue, and stepping out, he said:

"Girls, it's me, Minkskin Mike. In God's name, what brings you here at this time of night?"

A little cry of joy burst from the maidens' lips.

"Oh, Alice! it is Minkskin Mike!" cried Kitty, joyfully.

"Great Texas, girls!" exclaimed the boy, "what in the world brings you here at this time of night? Has anything gone wrong at the settlement?"

"No, Mike, not yet, but the Indians are advancing on Pine Valley. They have been murdering and burning in the settlements west of us, and one of the settlers who escaped came over to warn us."

"I learned this evening," replied Mike, "that such was the case, and I am now on my way to put your people on their guard. But, Kitty, you have not answered me; why are you and Alice here?"

"We were on our way to your cabin. I heard many of the men express the wish that you were there to act as scout, and yet they were afraid to send one man away for fear of an attack before he returned; and so Alice and I thought we must do something to help, and we resolved to go after you. We stole away, telling only one person where we were going, and should we be missed, that person is to inform our parents where we have gone."

"Why, girls, you are little heroines," said Mike, "for you are surely running great risks here in this bear-infested, Indian-haunted wood."

"But we will all feel so much safer, Mike, when you are with us, for you know the woods so well."

"It makes me feel proud to hear you say so, Kitty," replied the young sharpshooter, with a sense of manly pride; "but let me tell you that I left six friends at my cabin who are worth forty common men in fighting Ingins, and if you girls arn't afraid to return home alone, I'll go back and bring my friends to Pine Valley."

"No, we're not afraid to return alone, Mike," answered Kitty; "and it will be good news to our friends when they hear that you and six others are coming to help them."

"Then I'd better be off at once, Kitty, for the night is wearing away."

"God speed you, Mike," Kitty said.

The young sharpshooter turned and began retracing his steps up the river, his meeting with Kitty having given elasticity to his steps and added anew to that growing spirit of love that he had so long entertained for the borderman's daughter.

Kitty and Alice turned their horse's head homeward, feeling that Heaven had favored them in their perilous mission. Their road lay nearly all the way through the woods, and as the sky had become overcast with clouds covering the moon about the time they met Mike, the darkness was deep and oppressive—so much so, in fact, that their young hearts began to grow timid and restless. A presentiment of danger filled their breasts—a presentiment that must have been born of intuition, for when within a mile or two of the village, and while riding through a dense spot of woods, their horse was suddenly seized by a hand thrust out from the roadside and stopped.

A cry of alarm burst from the girls' lips.

Then a second figure emerged from the woods and, reaching up, seized Alice by the arm, and was about to drag her from the horse's back, when a little pistol in the hand of Kitty flashed in the villain's face, and he fell dead.

But the report of the weapon startled the horse so that the animal, jumping suddenly to one side, threw its riders to the ground. The man who had seized the animal's bits was also thrown violently to the earth, and before he could recover himself the maidens had fled into the woods.

Hand in hand they flitted through the shadows, their hearts almost paralyzed with fear, and to add to their terror they had gone but a short distance ere they heard the quick tramp of feet evidently in pursuit of them. This discovery gave renewed speed to their feet, and they ran on and on until they finally got beyond hearing of their pursuers. But no sooner were they out of one danger than they discovered they were into another—that they were lost! In their flight they had paid no attention to their course, and, with the moon obscured, they had nothing by which to guide them. In hopes, however, of reaching some place of safety, or striking some familiar point by which

they could set themselves aright, they moved on.

Finally it began to grow lighter, and ere the fugitives were aware of it the rosy flush of dawn burst into flame and the sun arose in a clear summer sky. They could now make out the points of the compass, but they could not tell whether they were east or west, north or south of home. However, they moved on until their footsteps were suddenly arrested by a broad, smiling river before them. But what river could it be? Surely not the Minnesota, they thought, for they supposed all along they had been traveling away from it. Half exhausted, disheartened and hungry, the fugitives sat down under a tree where they could command a view of the river up and down for half a mile.

Kitty Hamlin, being of a practical turn of mind, began to discuss their situation. She thought it quite probable that they had, in their bewilderment, become turned around and wandered back to the Minnesota river. She did not think it possible that they had got in below the village, and if they had not, by continuing on down the stream they would reach home. But another question now arose, and that was as to which way the river was flowing—to the right or left. They could see no movement of the current. If they could only see some drifting object that would settle the matter. But an hour's close watching brought nothing in view upon the glassy waters of the stream.

Greatly disheartened, they finally arose to continue their journey, when Alice laid her hand upon Kitty's arm, and, pointing up the river, said:

"Kitty, there come two boats!"

"Yes," replied Kitty, clapping her little hands, while her pretty face became radiant with joy, "and they are filled with white men—friends, Alice!"

Before Alice could make any reply, footsteps sounded behind them, and turning, the maidens found themselves face to face with four hideously-painted Indian warriors, whose faces wore the look of smiling demons.

CHAPTER VI.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

MINKSKIN MIKE retraced his footsteps to the vicinity of his cabin in a remarkably short time. To his fears, however, as he approached within a mile of the place, his ears were greeted with a wild, savage yell, mingled with the discharge of fire-arms. That his friends had been attacked by the red-skins there was no doubt, yet from the sounds of battle he felt convinced they were holding the foe at bay.

Moving on he soon gained a point where he could command a view of the cabin. He could see the dark forms of the savages darting here and there along the edge of the little opening in which the building stood, and ever and anon he could see a tongue of fire dart from the walls of the cabin, which told him his friends were on the alert.

After making a circuit of the cabin, Mike became fully satisfied that at least a hundred Indians surrounded it, and that death would be inevitable unless they managed to escape from the building soon. The young sharpshooter knew enough of the Indians to know that they would not be repelled more than once or twice in an open attack before they would have recourse to fire.

Around behind a rock some thirty rods from the cabin, Minkskin found a dozen dead and wounded savages, that had been carried there by their friends from the field of conflict, and which told him of the boys' deadly work.

Mike's greatest desire now was to reach the side of his friends, but how he was to accomplish it was the question uppermost in his mind. He felt satisfied by the movements going on among the foe that another charge was soon to be made upon the cabin, and he wanted to be in a position where he could render the boys some assistance.

While the young borderman sat revolving the matter in his mind he heard a sound as if of something crawling along toward him. It was accompanied with a heavy, labored breathing that puzzled him.

Drawing a pistol, the boy sat ready for the worst. He made up his mind it was an Indian crawling toward him, and yet it seemed singular that an Indian would observe so little silence were he trying to steal upon a foe.

The whole matter was soon explained by the unknown dropping heavily upon the ground within a few feet of where Mike was sitting. The boy could now see that it was an Indian warrior, and that he was severely wounded, and

had crawled off there and laid down to die. Mike remained quiet and watched the savage, whose respiration was long and deep drawn. At length he seemed to smother—made a few gasps, tried to rise but fell heavily back, and stretching himself at full length, rattled in the throat, and was dead.

"Who says the Lord doesn't favor me?" soiloquized the young hunter, as he sat regarding the dead warrior. "I was just wishing for an Indian outfit, when along comes one already killed and yields up the ghost at my very feet. Now I'll hustle around and put on that red-skin's outfit, paint up a little, and then when them demons charge upon the cabin I'll charge with 'em, like heap big Injin—waugh!"

So musing the boy laid aside his weapons and went to work. He stripped the garments off the dead warrior and donned them himself, even to the fanciful feathered head-gear. Then with the blood from the red-skin's veins he smeared his face and hands until he appeared the incarnation of savage hideousness. This done he took the dead warrior's tomahawk in one hand, his own rifle in the other, and was ready for the charge upon the cabin.

He now crept noiselessly to within a few rods of several Indians whom he could hear talking in low, eager tones. There he stood, waiting and watching for the moment to act. Nor had he long to wait, for suddenly the cry of a night-bird rung out on the air and was answered from half a dozen different points, and then, just as the moon sunk behind the western tree-tops, a wild, demoniac yell burst forth on the night, and full four score dusky forms glided from the darkness of the woods across the little opening toward the cabin.

Like a deer Minkskin glided from his concealment, and with upraised tomahawk dashed in among the screaming savages, and undetected swept on with them toward the cabin.

A deadly fire was opened upon the foe by the little band of whites in the building. To Mike it seemed that every gun had been turned upon the party with which he was advancing, for their bullets did deadly work around him.

Owing to the darkness and audacity of his adventure, Mike's enemies never once suspected his presence, and the boy's only fears were that the savages might retreat before the defenders' withering fire before the cabin was reached, in which case he would have to retreat with them or take his chances in face of his friends' unerring aim in reaching the building and making his presence known.

To his success, however, the Indians charged up to the very walls of the cabin and made a desperate assault upon the door. Mike made for the corner of the building and there fell upon his face, to all appearance dead, to await the result of the attack.

The cabin had been originally built for a trading-post, and had been provided with every means of strength and defense. This enabled the defenders to concentrate a deadly fire upon the assaulting savages.

To force the door was the first object of the red skins, but they found this a far greater task than they had calculated upon, and for the third time they were forced to retreat to the cover of the woods—this time in the wildest confusion. Fully a score of dead and dying were left near the door and the groans of the wounded were frightful, while inside the cabin the shouts of the victors fairly shook the walls of their defense.

As soon as the last Indian had disappeared in the woods, Mike raised his head, and began crawling around the building. Reaching the door he laid down and, placing his lips to the crack at the bottom of the door, uttered a short, sharp whistle.

Instantly there was silence inside.

"Jim?—Columbia Jim?" Minkskin called out in a subdued tone.

"Who in the dumbed nation are you?" Old Jim asked.

"Me—Minkskin Mike."

"Minkskin thunder!" was the blunt reply, "you can't yank the wool over our eyes by any sich lies. You're an old renegade, and if ye don't git away from there you'll git some lead into your carcass."

"I tell you I am Minkskin Mike," declared the boy in a louder voice, "and if you [don't let me in soon I'll be apt to get bulletted out here."

"It is Mike, I do believe," declared Sam Moshier.

"Dumbed if it isn't," affirmed Old Jim; "boys, strike a light and we'll open the door. Let every feller be ready to shoot and kick should it be a trap for us."

The lamp was lighted and then Columbia Jim

shot back the heavy bolts that held the door, calling out as he did so:

"Now look out, Minkskin, if it's you, and if it ain't you look out, for I'm goin' to open the door."

As he concluded he jerked the door open and Minkskin Mike dashed into the room and as the old borderman closed and barred the door again his young companions started back at sight of the hideous savage form before them, and the next instant six revolvers covered the breast of the disguised sharpshooter.

"Hold up there—go slow, boys; don't go back on a friend," said Mike, bursting into a peal of laughter, and going through some Indian performances that finally provoked his friends into mirth.

"Great, horn swogglers!" exclaimed Old Jim, "it's the boy for sartain; but what a miserable, ornary lookin' critter he is! I can't hardly keep my hands off'n him."

"He looks mean enough to be cycloned," said Cyclone Charlie, "but, I'm awful glad to see you back in any shape, Mike, though I wasn't looking for you so soon."

"I reckon you see we've got a batch o' red-skins in a hill-roarin' perdicamint, don't you?" put in Old Jim. "I reckon you observate that Old Co-lumbus Jim's on the war-path bigger'n a grizzly, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," replied Mike, "I see you've got the drop on the Injins—got it bad. You won't let them have your hair nor share my cabin with them. Yes, yes, you've got the drop on them as Joe Jinkins had on the wolves the time they chased him into a tree where they couldn't git at him. But, boys, laying all joking aside, we're in a pretty close fix."

"That's a fact, Mike, that's a fact," replied Old Jim.

"And so are the people of Pine Valley," said Mike; "on my way down the river I met Kitty Hamlin and Alice Walton on horseback, coming after me. The Ingins have been murdering and massacring over in the eastern settlements, and are marching toward Pine Valley. An escaped settler brought the news, and Kitty and Alice took into their heads to come after me. Boys, I promised them I would return and bring you all down to help defend the settlement."

"That was right, Mike," said Cyclone Charlie, "but the only way we can do so is to tumble right out o' here and sweep like a cyclone through the enemy's lines."

"Boys," said Old Jim, speaking more seriously than ever before, "the fact can't be denied that we are in great danger, for when the red-skins find out they can't take the place by storm they'll fire the cabin. Then we'll have to run or roast, and if we run the light of the burning shanty will enable them to bore us full o' holes. To make a dash for the woods now, as Cyclone proposes, I'm afraid 'd be the death o' some o' us. Mike, what d'you say?"

"Tunnel out."

"What d'you mean?"

"To dig a tunnel from my cellar due north. Ten or fifteen feet would bring us to a gully into which we could come out. It's almost concealed by vines, and once into it we can follow it toward the river to where the water backs up into the gully. There I've three canoes tied up and in them we can escape across the river."

"Pervidin' thar isn't a rigimint o' red-skins in the gully to receive us when we git there," said Old Jim.

"We've got to take our chances on that," continued Mike. "I've often thought how easy it'd be to tunnel out in a case of this very kind. I've a spade here and by taking turns about we can get out inside of two hours. What do you all say, boys?"

All answered in an affirmative tone, and in a few minutes Mike and Cyclone were in the cellar working like beavers. Mike digging and the other removing the dirt to the back part of the cellar.

In the mean time the others kept a close watch for the red-skins. Half an hour had passed, when a red light was seen out in the woods, glaring up from behind a little knoll. At sight of it Old Columbia Jim shook his head, and sent below for Minkskin Mike, one of the other boys taking the young sharpshooter's place in the tunnel.

"What d'you think 'bout that light, Mike?" Old Jim asked.

"Should say we'll soon find out," said Mike. "We may expect some burning arrows this way soon."

"Exactly what I koncluded," declared Old Jim.

"Another hour will be required to finish the

tunnel, and if we're not burned out before, we may stand a chance of getting away pretty nicely. You see we can't fight against flames, and I know the red-skins'll never suspect what we're up to—ah! see that fellow on the knoll between here and that light. He looms up so nicely that I'm constrained to try a shot at him."

Placing the muzzle of his rifle through a loop-hole, Mike took a careful aim at the savage, and fired.

"Hurrah!" shouted Old Jim, who was watching from another loop-hole the result of the shot; "you plugged him, boy, and I'll swear the critter hopped ten feet into the air, then run a few steps and keeled over—think you took him through the venison basket and gave him the cholera morbus."

All was quiet for several minutes, when Old Jim called attention to an Indian, who ran to the top of the knoll, fixed a burning arrow to a bow and shot it toward the cabin. The blazing missile described a beautiful curve through the air, and fell more than forty feet from the cabin.

"Dumb their smoked hides!" exclaimed Old Jim, "they're tryin' now to git the distance and elevation, and after while they'll plump their brands right down on top o' this 'ere castle, and then we'll smell the pitch and brimstun, boys."

"I'll take their elevation," declared Mike. "I'll stand right here and wing every one that shows himself with a burning arrow on that knoll."

"And I'll assist," said Cyclone Charlie, taking his position at a loop-hole.

They had not long to wait before a savage with a blazing arrow ran quickly to the top of the knoll, and sent the missile toward the cabin. But quick as the red-skin was, he was not in time to escape the boys' bullets, for both fired upon him, and he fell dead.

The second arrow fell within ten feet of the cabin-door, the point sticking into the earth within a foot of the face of a wounded savage. The blazing shaft lit up his face, that was pinched and contorted with the agonies of death, and threw a weird light over several other motionless forms on the earth. Regarding them for a moment through a loop-hole, Old Jim finally said:

"Mother o' Adam! what dee-struction has been done to them red-skins. What a season o' cyclones, nest o' paralyzers and ginaler epidam-ic them red-skins have run into, and yet the varmints show spunk—the more they're whipped the more—Oh, ho! there comes a burnin' arrow from behind the hill. They're taking the distance from a safer point—see! the arrow's fallen fifty paces short. Oh, Moses! if you dead-shots war where you could command a view o' that fire you could rake 'em from taw."

"Boys," said Mike, "they mean to burn us out, for they've the advantage and know it. I'll run down and see about the tunnel—keep a sharp lookout."

In the course of the next half-hour the Indians got the proper range and distance, and were now sending burning arrows onto the roof and into the side of the building. The shafts, being smeared with the gummy exudations from pine trees would burn for several minutes, and in a short time it became evident from the bright glow around the place that the whole roof was ablaze. This fact was communicated to Mike, who immediately came above and said:

"Get ready, boys, for the tunnel is completed to the gully."

Not a moment was lost. Each of the little band secured his weapons and descended into the cellar. Taking the lead, Mike crawled upon his hands and knees into the dark tunnel, and was followed by his friends.

On reaching the outlet Mike put his head out and listened. He could hear nothing but the crackling of the flames on the burning roof, and but for the bushes that fringed the gully the light would have shone full upon them.

Finding the way clear, the young sharpshooter dropped himself from the tunnel to the bottom of the ditch. He was immediately followed by Cyclone Charlie and then the other boys, old Columbia Jim bringing up the rear. When all were out Mike led the way toward the river, all crawling upon hands and knees with the silence of moving shadows.

Six rods from the mouth of the tunnel they came to where the water from the river backed up into the gully. Here lay three canoes, two of which were noiselessly pushed into the water. Then the party, dividing up, entered the boats, when Mike said, in a whisper:

"Now, boys, our lives are in the balance. One word or false movement and we're lost. We must hug the bank closely until we get below the line of light from the burning cabin; so, here we go."

So saying, the boy placed his paddle against the bank and pushed off into the deep water. The second boat was just starting when a noise was heard in the water on the right, and a figure was seen to emerge therefrom and dart up the bank. All who saw it knew it was a savage, but not a word was spoken, not a weapon raised, but with the quickness of a panther Cyclone Charley leaped from the boat to the shore, bounded up the bank and glided away after the wily savage.

"The little dare-devil!" exclaimed Old Jim in a subdued tone; "it will be sure death to him now—death to us to wait for him here!"

"Never mind him," said Sam Moshier, "he said to me in a whisper to go on and he'd join us below if we all escaped."

At this juncture a wild yell pealed through the night. The savage had given the alarm.

"Pull, boys, pull straight for the opposite shore!" cried Minkskin Mike.

With all their strength the boys plied their paddles, and the boats glided out across the brilliantly-lighted bosom of the river. To the utmost surprise of the fugitives, however, they succeeded in reaching the opposite shore unseen. At the time when they were most exposed the attention of the savages was upon Cyclone Charlie.

Off into the shadows of the woods the yells of the red-skins went trailing out. It seemed that a thousand infuriated demons were after that one daring boy.

"Mother o' Adam!" exclaimed Old Jim, "don't the infernal buffalo bullions roar though! Who'd think as small a critter as that boy, Charlie Cyclone, could stir up such a devil's nest?"

"Well, if he only escapes, his adventure will have proved a lucky move for us," said Mike, "seeing that we have escaped."

"But as the boy's not acquainted with these diggin's I'm afraid he's bit off more'n he can chaw. Even thir yellin' is subsidin' now, and that poor young Cyclone's quiverin' skulp may be at the girdle o' some savage. But look, Prince Mickey, the roof o' yer noble castle is beginnin' to tumble in."

"Yes; and I see the dusky demons gatherin' in its lights. Oh, if we were in that cabin now couldn't we mow the red daisies? But of course they know we're gone or they wouldn't expose themselves there; and it won't be long till they'll be bellerin' off through the woods in search of us for they'll find our tunnel now. If that Ingin escapes Cyclone's vengeance we'll not be safe on the water. If it wasn't runnin' away and leavin' a friend in danger, we could pull out and distance the savages."

"Don't borrow trouble 'bout that boy, Mike," said Old Jim, "for he's a leetle the nimblest-heeled kid I've hearn of since the cow jumped over the moon."

Talking in undertones the little band moved down the river. The trees that lined the shore soon concealed the burning cabin from view, but the red light could be seen glaring high into the night.

After journeying a mile or two the boats put out into the middle of the stream that they might not only get the benefit of the current, but escape any danger that might be lurking along the shore.

As the minutes wore on and an hour passed with no tidings from Cyclone Charlie, the little band began to entertain the greatest fears; for the death of the boy would be evidence of the escape of the Indian that he had pursued, and in such an event they were likely to be fired into at any moment, for the savage would reveal their means of escape.

With eyes and ears on the alert, however, they moved on. Suddenly a cry burst from the lips of Blackhawk Tom, and he pointed down at the water whereon he saw a human form floating alongside the canoe.

"What is it, boy—got the spasmodics?" asked Old Jim, somewhat disturbed by the boy's outcry.

"A floater—a dead body!" said Tom.

"Not by a dashed sight!" came from the lips of the floater in a voice that all recognized.

"Miss Helen Blazes!" burst from Columbia Jim's lips; "it's the boy—that June hurricane—that lightnin'-heeled, limber-legged human thunderbolt, Cyclone Charles!"

And so it was. The boy had escaped from the clutches of the foe, and by swimming had intercepted the boats.

As he was assisted into one of the canoes, Minkskin asked:

"Cyclone, did you git what you went after?"

"I should say I did, Mike—see that?" and the desparate boy displayed as evidence of his victory a savage scalp-lock, the sight of which sent a shudder over his friends.

"Oh, mother o' Adam!" groaned Old Jim. "What a wretch you are, boy—jist as good as stole that scalp from me. I reckon you don't know I war jist in the act o' reachin' for that red's tresses when you bulged in ahead o' me, do you? Do you know, Charlie, that small folks should be seen and not heard? Ar'n't you young pilgrimses goin' to give me a show? D'yous purpose to take all the fun away from me 'ca'se I'm old? Don't you ever reflect that I, Old Columbia Jim, am on the war-path? I may not git there so frisky as you kids, but when I do you'll think the dam's bu'sted and a Noah's flood let loose. I don't want to start an opposition-Ingin-fightin' outfit to you kids, but if you don't give me a show, I'll call for a division and let myself loose, and bless my liver-pins if I don't make these old woods ring from Hackensack to Jericho."

"All right, Columbia Jeems, you may take the next whirl," said Cyclone; "but you'll have to make your old bones rattle and your moccasins smoke if you git into as close a place as I did to-night."

"I can do that, lad—I'll bet I can distance you to-night," asserted Old Jim. "I'm one o' the fastest runners outside o' forty-nine penitentiaries. I'll tell you what I done once—shamed to own it, but it's so. You see I'd been away up in the big north huntin' and trappin' for years and years. I staid right there—heard nothin' from civilization for a hull century, so it seemed, and so I concluded to go down to Dubuque and learn who war president, and find out who'd licked in the Mexican war and whether they war still in the notion o' draftin' volunteers, as when I'd left. I'd hearn o' the railroad cars afore I'd left home, but I'd never see'd one o' the critters, and hadn't any more idee what they looked like than the man in the moon; and I never met any one that could tell me whether they war run by horses, oxen or mules. But as I war sayin', I war on my way to Dubuque. I war crossin' a big prairie when I see'd a long thing stretchin' across the plain that looked like a bank o' fresh dirt. It got awful dark before I could reach it, but jist as I was within a rod of it I hearn an awful roarin', then an awful wild scream that made the earth tremble. I looked back, and mighty Moses! I saw the awfulest blazin' single eye glarin' straight at me—the eye of a great black monster that war rushin' furiously toward me. Oh, mother o' Adam! how I felt! I war afoot, an' pinnin' back my ears I said, 'Columbia Jim, that's wusser than the draft—light out if you'd live,' and then, boys, I lit. Holy smoke o' Jerusalem! the way I whisked along over that prairie war next to nothin', and would you believe it? on came that roarin', hissin', pantin', wheezin', smokin' demon after me, the glare o' its single eye shinin' on my very heels."

"Wal, boys, it looked bad for me then; so I throwed aside my rifle and hat, opened my collar, spit on my hands, and says I again: 'Jim, the Siberian monster's after you, and your life lies in your heels,' and then I buckled right down to business. Oh, lightnin'! but I did run! Why, I just left my own shade—left the soles of my moccasins spinnin' in the air. The friction created by rushin' so furiously through space set my clothes on fire. I come to a deep, broad river, and were half-way 'cross it afore I sunk ankle deep in the water; then when I did gradually sink to my neck, I war goin' so fast as to leave a gash in the water twenty feet long. I came up ker-plump against the opposite bank, and dashed up the dirt like a big cannon-ball; but I fell back into the river half exhausted. And afore I could git out and under way again, that one-eyed monster roared across the river apast me, and went on over the prairie w th a red light on its tail a-twinklin', and then I begun to realize that I'd been a lambasted ole ejot—that the Salurian monster war nothin' else'n a train o' railroad cars. Dumb the things, they're a nuisance—ruin the stage companies, ox business, and scare all the game outen the country; but how's that for good, fast runnin', boys?"

"Splendid! superb! magnificent!" were the different answers, that were accompanied by a low, suppressed laugh.

With all the strength the fugitives could command they hurried their boats down the river, and as each craft was provided with two paddles, their progress was rapid.

Mile after mile glided by, and by the time the eastern sky began to herald the morning dawn, they had traversed two-thirds of the distance to Pine Valley.

At length broad daylight was upon them. The sun rose in a cloudless sky; birds sung their morning carols; the fresh breath of the young day kissed the cheeks of the little band of bordermen, and filled their breasts with renewed energies. Buoyant with hope and flushed with their past victories, they glided on discussing the future problems of the Indian war, and mapping out their own plans of action. While thus engaged, they were suddenly startled by a wild, terrified shriek—the shriek of a female.

CHAPTER VII.

SOME SHARPSHOOTING

LIKE so many startled deer, the little band of bordermen was on the alert in an instant, with eye and ear exerted to their utmost.

They heard that shriek repeated. It came from around the sharp bend in the river before them.

"By the mother o' Adam!" exclaimed Columbia Jim, "somethin's goin' wrong 'round there, kids. Pull like Satan, for, dust my eyes, if there isn't a female woman in trouble 'round there!"

The boats leaped forward under vigorous strokes, and in a few moments they rounded the bend, when, to their horror and surprise, they saw two Indian canoes put out into the river from the left shore, filled with savages, and in the arms of two of them in the foremost boat, two female captives were struggling.

"My Lord!" cried Minkskin Mike, "they have got Kitty Hamlin and Alice Walton! Boys, there is work for us!"

Dropping his paddle the young sharpshooter took up his rifle. Then he ordered the other to cease paddling, and as the boat came to a stand, he rested his elbow on the gunwale and took a deliberate aim at one of the savages in the foremost boat, and fired. And true to the aim the bullet went home, and the red-skin, dropping his paddle, leaped straight into the air, and fell overboard into the river.

And scarcely had his rifle pealed out ere that of Cyclone Charlie followed, with a like result.

A yell of dismay escaped the red-skins' lips, and those in the hindmost boat opened fire upon the boys, but as they were headed across the stream, and fired with their boat in violent motion their bullets did no harm.

Seeing their advantage over the foe, who were endeavoring to reach the opposite shore, Old Jim yelled out:

"Hurrah, boys! plug it to 'em! We boy sharpshooters has got the drop on them. Go in thar, you two kids with the keen eyes and steady narves—plug them devils in the foremost boat, and you other brats warp it to them in t'other craft! Don't hit the gals if you can help it, boys, but better they die with your bullets than Ingin torment."

There were five Indians in the foremost boat, seven in the other, and in their wild efforts to get across the stream and gain the cover of the woods, their fire was wild and harmless. This encouraged the whites, who, permitting their boats to drift at the will of the current, were enabled to aim with deadly accuracy.

For Minkskin and Cyclone to reload and fire again was the work of but a moment, and the result was the death of a third savage.

Old Jim and the other boys kept up a steady fire on the other boat, and soon half the savages therein were killed and wounded.

This threw the surviving red-skins into a wild panic, and laying aside their guns they bent every effort toward getting ashore, for they saw they were no match for the young sharpshooters.

While one of the remaining two savages in the first boat plied the paddle, the other held the captives, at the same time screening himself from bullets behind the forms of the maidens. But a third shot from Mike's rifle caused the paddler to drop his blade and utter a yell that told he had been mortally wounded.

But quickly the other boat ran alongside the ill-fated craft and took it in tow, and despite the most desperate efforts of the boys, three of the savages succeeded in reaching the shore unharmed. Two of them seized the girls and leaping from the boats bounded up the bank.

Once again the rifle of Minkskin Mike spoke out and the wretch with Kitty in his arms fell forward dead across his struggling captive.

Cyclone Charlie was reloading his gun and not one of the other boys had confidence enough in his marksmanship to fire through fear of wounding or killing the maidens, and before

Mike or Cyclone could get in another shot, the two surviving savages had escaped into the woods with the captives.

"Now, boys, pull for the shore, and we'll make short work of them dumb varlets!" cried old Jim.

"I don't know 'bout that, Jim," replied Mike, his features set with a desperate look, "them two savages'd never struck out with them gals had they not had some assurance of help from some source. However, we'll give them the best we've got if we die."

While thus speaking the canoes were gliding shoreward, and in a few moments the brigade had landed and were off in pursuit of the savages whom they saw fleeing up the river carrying the insensible forms of the captives across their shoulders.

"Come on, boys!" yelled old Jim; "burst the air wide open!"

Then the chase began, but before the pursuers had gone fifty rods a yell that seemed to peal from a thousand throats burst upon their ears, and then a myriad of dusky forms were seen to rise from the earth and sweep down toward the little band of whites.

"Helen Blazes, boys!" cried old Jim, "we've been ambushed—there's no escape! see! they're before us—above and below, and the river is behind us!"

"Run, boys! run!" coolly exclaimed Minkskin Mike, whose presence of mind did not desert him even in the face of such a deadly danger, "run for the river bank!"

The chase continued but the pursuers were now the pursued. Taking the lead Mike ran to the river bank and, never halting, leaped over into the river.

Old Jim, who was close at Mike's heels, yelled out, as he leaped over the embankment: "Foller the bell-wether, boys!"

Over into the stream leaped the whole of the brigade into the deep water. Every one sunk out of sight, but as he rose to the surface like a cork, Mike, who had crawled under the bank, called out:

"Here, up here under the bank, pard."

At this point the river was fully twenty feet deep, and from the top of the embankment to the water it was as much as fifteen feet. The bank was nothing but clay and gravel and had been greatly undermined by the action of the water, so that the point from which the boys leaped projected fully ten feet out over the river. And up under this bank the boys took shelter for the savages could not get at them from above.

But no sooner did Mike see all his friends safely at his side than he said:

"Come, boys, hurry along and maybe we can give 'em the dodge. That's our only show now for our powder's soakin' wet."

He led the way down the river unobserved by the savages. They finally stopped at a point where escape from under the bank would be easy should a chance be offered.

Howling like demons the savages rushed to the river's bank. Some threw themselves on their stomachs, and hanging over the edge, endeavored to look under. The whole savage band had gathered on the bank and were standing close upon the edge when suddenly, and without warning, the whole bank for twenty rods toppled over into the river with a thunderous crash, carrying all but half a dozen of the red-skins with it.

A wild yell of dismay escaped the savages' lips, as with a thousand tons of earth they sunk in the waves.

Old Columbia Jim could not repress a fit of hearty laughter as he saw the foe struggling in the surging waves that rolled from shore to shore—dashed against each other and fell back like ocean breakers.

Many of the red-skins were buried beneath the earth in the bottom of the river. Many were held fast so long under the waves that when they came to the surface they were in a drowning condition and struggled feebly for life. Those who had not been buried into the river threw aside their weapons and plunged into the stream to assist their friends. The young sharpshooters were, for the time being, forgotten. This the latter readily perceived. The golden opportunity for escape was now at hand, and the fugitives lost no time in taking advantage of it. They crept out from under the bank and by swimming and wading, reached their canoe and embarked therein before even discovered.

Old Columbia Jim, unable to resist the temptation, swung his cap in the air and shouted back in defiance to the foe who made no effort to follow them, and, strange as it may

seem, the sharpshooters escaped with no further loss nor damage than some of their weapons and their powder.

"But the most serious misfortune of all was the escape of the red-skins with Kitty and Alice. Nor were the young bordermen in a condition to follow them for there was not a dry grain of powder in the crowd. In all his life not one of the party had ever found himself reduced to his present condition before, and the only thing to be done was to hurry on to Pine Valley and repair losses. This the party did, and upon arriving there found the settlement in a fever of excitement.

The settlers were busily engaged preparing to leave their homes for safer quarters south. In fact, they had their teams packed with their movable effects ready to start. They were anxiously waiting the return of Kitty and Alice, and when Mike broke to them the news of the maidens' capture their hearts were wrung with grief. Some of them—among whom was Randolph Hill—declared they would not leave until the girls were known to be safe or dead; but Mike and old Jim soon convinced them that such a step would be suicidal, and so all left the village on the promise of the hunters that they would rescue the girls if within human power to do so.

Before leaving their homes the settlers furnished the sharpshooters with a sumptuous breakfast, provision sufficient to last them a day or two, and an ample supply of ammunition.

Just before taking their departure Minkskin Mike took Major Gardette aside and interrogated him as follows:

"Major, has it ever occurred to you that there are enemies in your own midst?"

"Well, really, Mike, I've thought it very strange that certain things have worked as they have," replied the old major. "I don't doubt but a certain class of white men are instigating the Indians to hostilities, but I've never thought that they had any agents at Pine Valley."

"Has any one been absent since the shooting match, that you know of?" asked Mike.

"Yes, there has. David Belmont left the same day, soon after you departed, and his friend, Dolph Hill, has been sorely uneasy 'bout his safety."

"Exactly," thought Mike. "Belmont was Danton, who got the drop on me in the glade—whom old Jim winged."

"But, Mike," continued old Major Gardette, "have you seen anything suspicious in any of our folks?"

"Have you ever heard of the name, or known a person by the name of Laclede?" Mike asked.

"Laclede? Laclede?" repeated the major, passing his hand over his brow in a reflective manner. "Don't remember as I have, Minkskin. Why?"

"Has Dolph Hill been absent at any time since the shooting match?"

"Not as I know of, Mike," looking surprised.

"Then he might have spent an entire night away from the village and you not know it?"

"Certainly. But do you suspect Dolph?"

"I do, major. He's a sly cuss—a bad man, whom you folks 'll do well to watch," declared the boy.

"All right, Mike, we'll take your advice. But now, boy, the train is ready to move, and I must bid you godspeed in your search for them little gals and be off."

The two parted, the major joining his friends while Mike turned and moved away to where his little party was in waiting for him.

As the two friends' footsteps died away in the distance a man emerged from a clump of bushes near where they had held their private interview, and pausing, looked around him with furtive, restless glances.

It was Randolph Hill, and his face was black with the storm of passion raging within his breast.

He had overheard the conversation between Major Gardette and Minkskin Mike!

CHAPTER VIII. BEARDING THE LION.

A week has passed since the events narrated in the preceding chapter transpired, and the scene of our story has changed.

In a deep, dark ravine compassed on all sides by rocky, wooded bluffs, the figure of a man emerged from the tangled vines and bushes at the foot of the hill and paused under a wide branching tree. The man was Old Columbia Jim, and the time was early morning. Yawning drowsily, and then rubbing his eyes, he glanced warily around him, then uttered two or three sharp whistles.

A few moments later the form of Sam Moshier

came from the bushes and advanced to the side of the old hunter. He was immediately followed by Bigfoot Ben and "Squinty."

"Mornin', boys; had a good night's rest?" Old Jim asked.

The answer was in the affirmative.

"Minkskin and Cyclone hav'n't returned yet, I see," remarked Sam Moshier.

"No," replied Old Jim, "and I do hope the boys hav'n't got into trouble."

"Not a bit of it," said Bigfoot Ben, "for there they come this blessed moment."

True enough. Minkskin and Cyclone were in sight, approaching from down the gorge.

But where were Blackhawk Tom and Nick Parsons? They were nowhere to be seen, nor were they expected by their friends.

The past week had been an eventful one to the little brigade of border-boys. Since leaving Pine Valley they had been unceasing in their search for Kitty Hamlin and Alice Walton, but so far had not obtained the slightest clew to their whereabouts. They believed, however, that they were in the Indian village, but the savages had contested their approach to the camp with a desperate determination, and in the many struggles that occurred Blackhawk and Nick had fallen victims to savage bullets, and had been buried by their sorrowing comrades in a secluded spot among the hills.

The death of these two brave boys proved a serious loss to the brigade, and threw a cloud of sadness over their spirits. For awhile it seemed that a similar fate awaited them all unless they fled the dangers of that locality; but this Minkskin Mike could not think of doing for a moment, or as long at least as he knew those maidens were in danger. Nor would he, after repeated failures, give up the idea of entering the Indian village and satisfying himself beyond a reasonable doubt that the girls were not there.

They had taken up their quarters in the ravine or gorge as a matter of security from the prowling savages. The place was known as Spirit Valley, and no savage foot ever trod its desolate labyrinths, for Indian tradition had peopled it with the departed spirits of slain enemies. This fact was known to Mike, and so he and his companions availed themselves of the red-skins' superstition by making the place their retreat while operating in that vicinity.

The night previous Minkskin and Cyclone had been out reconnoitering around the village, and it is from this scout that they have just returned.

"A little late, boys, ar'n't ye?" asked Old Jim, as the youths came up, looking somewhat fatigued and worn by their long night's perilous work.

"Better late than never, Jim," replied Minkskin, resolutely.

"Well, anything good to report this time, boys?"

"Not a thing," responded the young sharpshooter, in a despondent tone.

"I'll swear, it's too bad," said Old Jim, seriously.

"Well, we've decided on making one grand and desperate effort to learn the secrets of that Ingin town, and if we fail in that, our breath 'll be apt to fail us also."

"What's in yer heads now?"

"We're going' to disguise ourselves as Chippewas, and go boldly into the village. Cyclone is familiar with their dress and language, as well as the Sioux's, and we think we can make a success of it. All the able-bodied warriors are away on the war-path, and only the old men and boys are left to guard the place, and they'll not be as sharp and observing. Besides, we'll enter about dusk, and the shadows 'll help our disguise a little. We'll go with a message from Eagle Head, the Chippewa chief, to the Sioux chief."

"Boys, that 'll be a dangerous undertakin',"

said Old Jim.

"It's our last resort," said Minkskin Mike, "to find out whether the girls are there or not."

The boys had so set their hearts upon the adventure that the strongest arguments of their friends could not dissuade them from their purpose.

The brigade breakfasted that morning on cold broiled meats, and after the repast Mike and Cyclone crept into the bushes, and laying down, went to sleep. They slept until noon, when they awoke, feeling greatly refreshed. They now proceeded to make preparations for their visit to the Indian camp.

Having anticipated just some such an emergency, the brigade had provided themselves with pigments of different colors, and as for

Indian garments they had an abundant supply taken from their fallen victims.

Cyclone Charlie now displayed his artistic skill in dressing and painting up Minkskin in a style becoming a Chippewa warrior; and after Mike was ready, he dressed himself, and called on Old Jim to lay on the war-paint.

"I can do it, Cyclone," said Old Jim, "with all the variations."

About sunset the boys took leave of their friends, and set out for the Indian village, some three miles westward, and by the time it was fairly dark, they had reached the outskirts of the town unseen or unchallenged.

The Indians were all, or most of them, moving about. Fires burned in the open air in various parts of the town, and the wary sentinels paced their beats with eye and ear on the alert.

Suddenly—by some mysterious system of telegraphy, the news spread like wildfire through the village that two runners from the Chippewa village had arrived and had been conducted to the lodge of the old chief, whose age had forbid him leaving camp for the war-path.

In a short time every soul in the town had filed apast the chief's lodge curious to get a glimpse of the Chippewas. But so much curiosity did not please the two daring boys, and they kept their faces from the eager crowd as much as was consistent without arousing suspicion.

The old chief received them with his usual savage dignity into his lodge, then as a mark of honor to the messengers, water was brought them in gourds by the hand of the chief's lovely, dark-eyed daughter, Dove-Eyes. After this brief ceremony the princess retired, the chief closed his lodge all around, and sitting down informed the messengers that he was ready to listen to the words from the Chippewa chief.

"Blacktail Deer," as Cyclone had introduced himself, began delivering his well-studied message. The chief listened with stoical indifference, his eyes fixed upon the ground and his face scarcely visible in the encircling clouds of tobacco-smoke that poured from between his lips. Blacktail Deer felt a sense of disappointment when he discovered that his occasional studied flights of eloquence failed to move a muscle of the old Sioux's face, or attract even an approving glance of the eye. And to still add to his embarrassment, the old chief finally arose, walked out of the lodge, spoke to some one at the door, returned, filled his pipe again, and then resuming his seat, said:

"Let the young Chippewa go on. The Sioux chief is glad to hear from his brother, and that he espouses our cause against the pale-faces who are invading our country as they did our forefathers—killing our game and taking our fish from our river and lakes."

In these words there was some encouragement to Blacktail, but the chief's rudeness had stopped him in the middle of his speech, and it was with some little difficulty that he got his bearings and went on. When he did, however, he stood prepared for any interruption by way of applause or comments by the chief, but that demure and stoical old savage had nothing further to say. His silence puzzled the wits of the boys. They had hoped to engage him in a conversation that would present an opportunity to speak of pale-face captives, or draw the chief out into recounting his victories, the number of scalps his warriors had taken, and the captives that had fallen into his hands.

In the mean time a smile played about the lips of Minkskin Mike at the futile, yet labored efforts of his companion to gain any information; and when Cyclone noticed it he was sorely tempted to brain the chief and run for life.

After exhausting every available subject that his wits could suggest as pertinent, Blacktail Deer became silent. Two minutes had passed in dead silence when the chief arose and advancing toward the door of the lodge, said:

"Let the Chippewas follow me."

He then pushed aside the door of the lodge and went out. The boys arose and followed him as requested. As they did so they found themselves between two lines of old and young warriors drawn up in front of the lodge. At sight of them an inward shudder of fear took possession of the boys, but seeing no weapons visible about the Indians, they concluded it was but a demonstration of honor in their behalf, and with firm steps followed after the chief. When half-way down the lines the old Sioux stopped suddenly, quickly turned and faced the boys, the look of a triumphant old demon on his face.

At the same instant a blood-chilling war-whoop burst from the lips of the warriors, two

score of tomahawks and knives leaped from concealment and were raised over the heads of the two young spies.

Raising his hand and pointing his finger first at one, and then the other of the young sharpshooters, the chief said:

"Pale-face spy! the young Sharp Shoot! they shall die like dogs! Waugh!"

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE DEATH-LODGE.

THE young sharpshooters realized that the most eventful moment in their lives had arrived; and yet they were, in a measure equal to the occasion. With wonderful presence of mind they maintained their composure—showing no fear—never flinching under the upraised weapons—determined to die, if die they must then, without a murmur.

The old chief had, after all, outwitted them. True, they had succeeded in getting into the village and his presence, but all the time they were in the lodge they were the deceived and the wily old savage the deceiver.

Quickly the savages formed a circle around the boys, and it was only by the most strenuous efforts that the impulsive Indian lads could be restrained from massacring them on the spot. While the chief and some of the old warriors kept the howling, screeching mob back, others seized the prisoners and bound them hand and foot. Water was then brought in vessels by the squaws and poured upon their heads and dashed into their faces until the paint was all washed off. The result of this bath was two of the most dilapidated and doleful looking specimens of humanity that ever went masquerading in Indian disguise; and while their appearance provoked the squaws and boys into jeers of derisive laughter, the face of Minkskin Mike fairly set the old warriors wild with frenzy.

To prevent their being slain the prisoners were taken to the Death-Lodge to be held for the torture-stake. They were thrown upon their backs, their arms and legs extended, and then securely bound to stakes driven into the ground. The position was a painful one but the youths uttered no murmur. They knew that they had been consigned to the Death-Lodge from whence no captive ever went save to the torture-stake, and the quickest way to end their suffering was to bear it with resignation. Evidence of pain and suffering they knew would only induce the savages to prolong the torture.

After the prisoners were secured in the Death-Lodge, the warriors all went out, the lodge was closed all around, and two death-watches were stationed at the entrance outside.

Meanwhile, the most demoniac demonstrations were kept up by the savages throughout the village without intermission.

"Well, Mike," Cyclone Charlie said, when he found they were alone, "we're goners."

"It looks that way, Charlie," replied Minkskin. "God alone can save us now, and remembering He has been so good to us in the past, I still have hopes, for I have faith in Him."

"What an infernal, cunnin' old reprobate that chief is! He knew all the time, I see now, that we wasn't Chippewas. Oh, great furies! how I wish now we'd bu'sted him, and made a dash for life. I believe we'd made it."

The captives knew not what moment they might be taken from the Death-Lodge to the stake, but were it soon or late, they mutually agreed to meet their fate without a murmur.

The wild demonstrations of the savages finally seemed to concentrate at a point south of the Death-Lodge. The captives had no doubt but that preparations for their torture were being made. Bright fires in that direction lit up the night, and at the door of the lodge the boys, who could raise their heads slightly, could see the outlines of the death-watches through the sides of the lodge.

A sort of a dim, ghostly light pervaded the prison, and as the moments wore away into minutes, and the minutes into an hour, that seemed an age, the captives suddenly became aware of a dark shadow standing over them. They did not speak, for the terrible thought flashed through their minds that it was the dark angel of death hovering over them.

It seemed to move, and presently it bent over Mike. At the same moment the boy felt the touch of a hand on his breast—felt it move along to his face—felt soft fingers press his lips, then follow down his arm to where his hand was lashed to a stake. Then he felt his bonds severed and his right hand was free. A knife was then placed in that hand, and turning partly

over, Mike released his other hand, then his feet, and he was free in the Death-Lodge.

Quickly the youth turned to Cyclone Charlie, and in a moment he too was free. But how were they to make use of their liberty? The lodge was closely guarded; but then it occurred to them if one could enter there unseen they might escape by the same avenue. But now the question arose in their minds, who was their friend there in that savage encampment?

Minkskin Mike put out his hand. It came in contact with female garments. So a woman had liberated them, but who could it be? Could it be Kitty Hamlin? or Alice Walton? or either?

The unknown bent over Mike, and with her lips so close to his ear that he felt her warm breath on his cheek, whispered:

"Pale-faces, go quick—out this way—back Death-Lodge."

"Are there no guards there?" asked Mike.

"No; the death-guards are in front, and all the warriors are at the big fire, where a stake is being prepared to burn you," was the response.

"Who are you?" Mike asked.

"The friend of the pale-face girl, whom the young Sharp Shoot loves. I am Dove-Eyes, the chief's daughter."

"God bless you, Dove-Eyes," returned the boy, "but where is the girl you say Sharp Shoot loves?"

"You must go quick—run for your lives fast. When the sun is just above the tree tops tomorrow morning, Dove-Eyes will meet you where the Bear Creek meets the river and tell you all. She is not in the Indian village."

Minkskin's heart gave a great bound. The words of the princess had filled his heart with new hopes and gave to his spirits renewed energies. Touching Cyclone on the arm he said:

"Come, Charlie, God is on our side."

They crept to a slit in the lodge, through which they had seen the princess disappear with the silence of a shadow. The next moment they were out of the lodge flying northward through the village like the wind.

They were fully a hundred yards from the lodge before their escape was discovered, and even then they would not have been discovered but for Dove-Eyes, who, satisfied they would not be taken, in possession of some of her father's cunning, gave the alarm that she might thereby escape suspicion of having released them.

Like so many fiends let loose, the savages—men, boys and squaws, all dashed away in hot pursuit.

Off toward the nearest point of woods the fugitives sped, and ere the savages were aware of it, they had disappeared in the darkness. But the red-skins did not give up the chase. Like hounds searching for a lost trail, they went howling away in every direction in such wild confusion and disorder, that more than one of them fell under the blow of a friend in the darkness.

But Minkskin and Cyclone could now laugh at their disappointment, for the boys felt no fears. They made their way rapidly toward Spirit Gorge, feeling that their adventure had proved a partial success, and praising in the strongest terms they could command, the noble act of the angelic little Dove-Eyes.

On reaching Spirit Hollow, Old Jim, who was on guard, asked:

"What luck this time, kids?"

Minkskin sat down and narrated their adventure, which so amused the old borderman that he burst into a peal of laughter that went rebounding off through the Hollow like the wild laugh of a satyr.

"Dumb my moccasins!" the old fellow declared, "if I ever hear o' sich a mess o' sizin' hot adventures since the flood, as we boys are gettin' into. By the shades o' Pocahontas! I'll marry that Ingin gal if she says so. She deserves a good, white husband. Lordy! I wish I'd been in your place, Charliel. But I reckon you kids'll not try anything else on the old chief, eh?"

"Nothin' but powder and ball," responded Cyclone. "Moses! but I'd like to give him the gripes, and I will too. I'll give him some eloquence that'll make him bat his old eyes and—"

"Cyclone," interrupted Mike, "don't forget he is the father of Dove-Eyes."

"That's so, Mike, I had forgot—I'll take it all back," said Cyclone in a tone of contrition; "but it was meaner'n p'izen of the old gourd-head to set there and let me blow myself dizzy and never even grunt. Oh! it'd 'a' made a little dog laugh to see the sport; but I do believe Dove-Eyes is a good and honest Injun girl with some humanity about her."

"Yes," affirmed Mike, "and she doubtless took her own life in her hands when she stole into the Death-Lodge and liberated us; and if God spares me I shall meet her to-morrow morning at the mouth of Bear Creek, and give her the assurance of my eternal obligation and friendship."

CHAPTER X.

SOME STARTLING SURPRISES.

THE morning sun was just gilding the tree-tops when a light bark canoe, with a single occupant, turned from the Minnesota river into the mouth of Bear creek some three miles above the Indian village.

Dove-Eyes, the Indian princess, had kept her word, and as she lifted her paddle from the water and gazed anxiously at either shore, a look of disappointment swept over her face, but in an instant it changed to one of delight for on the right bank she caught sight of those she was there to meet, Minkskin Mike and Cyclone Charlie.

Heading her canoe toward them she soon reached the shore, and landing stood in the presence of those whose life she had saved the night before—proud, imperious and beautiful.

"I am glad Sharp-Shoot has kept his promise with Dove Eyes," the maiden said, her pretty dusky face wearing a look of mingled joy and sadness as she spoke.

"I would not deceive one who had saved my life, Dove-Eyes," Mike replied, "and would be only too glad if in some way I could repay you for your kindness."

"Dove Eyes is the daughter of a Sioux chief, and she hates all the pale-faces now," was her frank confession; "she saved your lives that she might have revenge on another."

A faint smile flitted over Cyclone's face and he winked slyly at Mike, for her confession t'bre a dampness over the spirits of her young admirers.

"Then some one has wronged you, Dove-Eyes?" Mike observed.

"Dove-Eyes once loved a pale-face," she said; "our people called him White Lance. He came often to our village. He professed friendship for my people, and sung and talked to Dove-Eyes until she learned to love him. She promised she would be his wife, but she hates him now! He was false to her. He lived in the village of the pale-face settlers, and all the time his heart belonged to a pale-face maiden—the one Sharp-Shoot loves—"

"Who, Kitty Hamlin?" interrupted Mike, then seeing he had exposed his heart secret, he tried to correct the blunder, but the broad grin on Cyclone's face convinced him he was only making matters worse.

"Yes," Dove-Eyes continued, "it was Kitty Hamlin. But she did not love him; she hated him, as Dove-Eyes does now; and so he sought the help of our warriors, and they captured the pale-face girl and her friend, and carried her away to a lonely island, and now White Lance will make her his wife. That is why Dove-Eyes' love has turned to hate. And she knew that Sharp Shoot loves the pale face maiden, for White Lance told his friend so. White Lance has wounded Dove-Eyes' heart, and now she will wound his heart by taking from him the pale-face girl that would make him happy."

"Then you can tell me where Kitty Hamlin is?" Minkskin remarked.

"She is with her white sister on an island many miles up the river."

"Good! good!" exclaimed Mike, joyfully. "Can you tell me what lake the island is in, Dove-Eyes?"

"No," was the disappointing answer; "there are many lakes there."

"I know it," said Mike, "and that is what perplexes me. But we will search every lake having an island between here and British America."

"But you will find no canoe with which to reach the island. White Lance concealed the canoe, and left the captives there with a negro squaw."

"Then, by Heavens, we'll swim!" declared Cyclone Charlie.

"Dove-Eyes, do you know where White Lance lives?" asked Mike.

"At the pale-face village there," and she pointed toward Pine Valley.

"And do you know his name when with the pale-faces, Dove-Eyes?"

"No."

A look of disappointment clouded Mike's face.

"Can you tell me how he looks? Can you describe him?"

"Yes," was the maiden's reply, and she took from under her blanket something wrapped in snow-white buckskin and handed it to Mike.

The boy unwrapped it and found it contained a photograph—the picture of Randolph Hill!

Minkskin Mike's face grew white with emotion. His eyes fairly blazed. He said never a word, but returning the picture he turned and began pacing to and fro in a restless, anxious manner.

There was a few moments' silence, then Cyclone asked:

"Where is the pale-faced son of a gun now, Dove-Eyes?"

"Dove-Eyes does not know. He may be with his captive."

"Curse him!" hissed Minkskin Mike, "we left him a week ago at Pine Valley. It's Dolph Hill, Charlie—that smooth-faced devil I've told and told the people there to look out for. But no—he made a display of wealth and polished manners, and that blinded them to his faults. Fools! But then, Cyclone, we must search those lakes till we find those girls."

"Dove-Eyes," said the Indian girl, lifting her eyes toward heaven, "will ask the Great Spirit to help you."

"God bless you, Dove-Eyes, is my prayer!" said Mike. "To reward you for saving our lives your heart's wrong shall be avenged. This I swear by the Great Spirit and the high heaven."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SEARCH AMONG THE LAKELETS.

TEN miles north of the mouth of Bear creek the whole country is dotted with those little lakelets so characteristic of Minnesota, ranging in size from one to a thousand acres in area. Most of them are surrounded by deep, pine woods and rough, precipitous shores, but there are many to be found that have low, grassy banks, pebbly shores, and lovely little islands. In places these lakelets are in clusters so close together that two persons fishing in different lakes can carry on a conversation in an ordinary tone.

On the day following the meeting with Dove-Eyes at the mouth of Bear Creek, Minkskin Mike and his five friends were wandering among those lakes in search of Kitty Hamlin and Alice Walton. They made the circuit of every lake that contained an island, and examined the shore carefully for footsteps. And when not fully satisfied, some one of the party would swim to the island and make a careful search of the undergrowth that covered most of them.

Thus for two days had they labored, and labored hard and in vain; and finally, growing tired and hungry, they sat down upon the shore of a lake whose circuit they had just completed, but whose island they had not searched.

"Dosh dash the dumbed luck!" said Old Columbia Jim; "I b'lieve that Injun gal war a fraud, boys—lied to you."

"No, no, Jim," replied Mike; "Dove Eyes was no fraud. She could have no earthly object in releasing us unless what she told us was so. That hound Hill has deceived her, and she is carefully working up a little revenge-game on him. Of course, the maiden could tell us nothing certain about the lake on which the girls had been imprisoned. She probably had to get what information she did by eavesdropping around the tent of the lordly White Lance, and—"

"Sh! Mike!" cautioned Cyclone; "there comes some deer—a doe and fawn—and we're out of meat and hungering."

Silence fell upon the party, and the doe and her young walked proudly, and all unsuspecting of danger, down to the water's edge and drank.

"It looks sinful, but it's a ground-hog case," said Cyclone, raising his rifle and killing the fawn.

As the report of the gun rolled over the lake and through the great woods, starting a hundred rebounding echoes, Old Jim exclaimed:

"Mother o' Adam! That'll bring every Injin in ten miles o' here snortin' down upon us!"

"Well, we'll fill up on deer-meat, and then we'll be in condition to buck 'em when they arrive. I'd rather die on a full stomach, Jim, than pinched with hunger."

In a few minutes the fawn was dressed, a fire was kindled, and the meat roasted on hot coals.

As the party sat eating their savory repast, Mike, who was looking out toward the wooded island in the lake, suddenly exclaimed:

"Boys, look yonder; what is that on that tree on the island?"

The island was half a mile away. It was covered with a dense grove of timber, and in

the top of one of the trees all saw an object which Old Jim declared was a hawk.

"Nary hawk, Jimmy," replied Cyclone Charlie, "it's a rag, that's what it is. I can see it flutterin'."

"Wal it may be, Charlie; these old eyes don't focus like they used to, but if it's what you say it is, the gals are on that island or I'll drink that lake dry. They've managed somehow to put that rag up to attract attention."

"I agree with you, Jim," said Mike, "and we must get over to that island somehow or other. But how will it be? It's too far to swim."

"Build a raft, Minkskin, as we come provided to do," said Old Columbia, "if we found it necessary. I know how to put 'em up that'd make old Noah scratch his head."

"A raft then it is, boys," said Minkskin Mike, and in a few moments the sound of their ax was heard along the shores of that lake. Having expected the need of such a tool the party had brought an ax with them.

All worked faithfully—some chopping, some carrying and rolling the logs to the water, while Old Jim put the raft together with strips of fibrous bark.

By the middle of the afternoon the craft was completed and boarding it the party set out for the island propelling their raft by means of long poles. The wind being in their favor, also assisted them, so that they moved along at a fair rate of speed.

As they neared the island the object fluttering in the tree became more distinct leaving no doubt in the minds of the party as to its significance. But with silent lips, listening ears and watchful eyes they approached the island. No sign of life, however, could be seen or heard, and it finally began to dawn upon their minds that the fluttering object in the tree might be a decoy to lead them into an ambush. For it seemed singular that, if there were any one but enemies on the island, they did not let themselves be seen unless restrained by those who would slay the boy brigade.

However, they moved on and finally touched upon the island.

Mike was the first to land. His friends followed. All expected to be met with dangers, but not a shot was fired—not a sound save the splash of the waves against the island could be heard. A deathlike stillness reigned over all.

Finally Minkskin decided to leave his friends and make a reconnoissance of the island. Should he meet with danger a whistle was to call his friends to his help.

Moving away the young borderman turned his footsteps toward the center of the island which was not far from five acres in area. The undergrowth was quite dense, but the lad noiselessly made his way through it.

Finally he stopped to listen. He started. He heard a strange sound, like a moan. His heart almost ceased to beat. There was some one on the island—some one in great agony and distress. He parted the bushes before him and peered through. He saw a rude Indian lodge standing under a wide, branching tree. It was open at one side and he could see persons inside of it.

Crawling closer, the sight that met his gaze sent the blood leaping through his veins.

In the lodge he saw Kitty Hamlin and Alice Walton! Between them upon a couch lay a negress tossing and moaning in the greatest agony. Kitty was fanning her while Alice was bathing her brow with cold water. The faces of the girls were pale, sad and bathed in tears. Not another soul was visible, yet Mike was too cautious to expose himself yet without making sure that no enemy lurked in concealment near.

He saw now how true had been the words of Dove-Eyes, almost to details. There were the maidens and the negress, but the latter appeared to be deathly sick, and her gentle captives were administering to her wants with angel hearts and hands.

Minkskin sat deliberating with himself as to how he should make his presence known without exciting the sick woman or the girls; and, while thus engaged, he was startled beyond expression to see Randolph Hill emerge from the bushes beyond the lodge, and with a look of apparent surprise and joy advance toward the maidens!

CHAPTER XII.

A CHECKMATED CHAP.

Kitty and Alice, hearing Hill's footsteps, quickly glanced up, and seeing who the intruder was, their sad faces became radiant with

joy, and in a voice full of emotion, Kitty cried out:

"Oh, Mr. Hill! I thank the Lord a friend has come!"

"Great heavens, girls!" replied the lying villain in apparent great surprise, "what on earth does this mean? how does it come you are here?"

The man was a fine actor and played his part well. He had never let his presence or hand be seen in all his scheming to get Kitty into his power, and the maidens had never suspected him of being the author of their troubles, and in reply to his last questions, Kitty said:

"We were brought here, Mr. Hill, by some wicked white men and left in charge of this negress. They said they would remove us to our friends in a few days; then they went away and we have not seen them since. The Indians captured us, but the white men said they ransomed us with gold, and powder and firearms. But, Oh! Mr. Hill, Dinah, I am afraid, is dying!"

"What ails her, Kitty?" Hill asked, bending forward and looking into the suffering woman's face.

"She fell from that tree whither she had climbed to tie my apron to a limb. We heard a gun fired across the lake and thinking it might be a friend we wanted to signal to him, and so Dinah, who has been very kind, and declared she would no longer serve her master as a prison-keeper for poor, helpless girls, consented to climb into the tree and put out our signal of distress. She succeeded in getting up, but in climbing down lost her hold and fell, poor thing!"

"Well, well, this beats me," said Hill a little sternly; "it is a good thing I drifted to this island. Your old keeper is in a bad shape, I confess," feeling her pulse.

The negress rallied, opened wide her eyes and staring wildly into Hill's face, cried out:

"Oh, Massa Laclede! you's come at las'. Lor', Lor', massa, I'se most done fo'—I'se dyin', I know I am suah. But massa, I'se kept dese little chickens safe fo' you, and—"

"What does the wench mean?" interrupted Hill starting back, his face betraying great agitation.

"She seems to know you," said Kitty.

"One would think so, but I never saw her before."

"Liar!" exclaimed a firm, clear voice and Minkskin Mike stepped from the bushes and confronted the scoundrel Hill.

A cry burst from Kitty's lips and she ran to where Mike stood and grasping his hand, while tears of joy filled her eyes, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Mike! Mike! We have prayed that you might come!"

"Curse you, Minkskin Mike! you shall die for that insult!" exclaimed Dolph Hill before Mike could speak to Kitty, and the villain drew his revolver and cocked it.

"Oh, no—not much my Mary Ann," came a quick, gruff voice from the bushes and Old Columbia Jim skipped into view with a revolver in his hand covering the breast of Hill, "and now I call your hand, Randolph."

The thwarted villain's hand fell slowly to his side and he started back like a wolf at bay snapping and snarling out the threat:

"This is foul, but remember there's a hereafter!"

"I know there is," said Old Jim, "but we pay as we go—will settle with you now, and the devil will settle with you in the hereafter. You fellers thought you'd rid this world of Old Jim Muchmore the night you tossed me into the river with a dornick tied to me, but thanks to Minkskin Michael, I was rescued to help hang you."

"Why do you insult me in the presence of these ladies by such talk? What do you mean?" asked Hill, assuming an air of injured innocence.

"Oh, but you're a deep one, White Lance—a sweet william to talk o' ladies and insults. Who else but your own self had them gals brought here?"

"It is false!" cried Hill, his face growing black with rage.

"Who met with Cuthbert Blake," Old Jim went on, "the night I was doused into the river? Who furnished a rope to tie me with? Who, but you, my lovely Jack Laclede?"

Hill fairly staggered under these questions, but so great was the fellow's brazen duplicity, and so easy could he change his emotions, that, assuming an air of innocence and surprise, he said:

"You are certainly mistaken, man, as to what you are saying to me. You have got the wrong man."

"No, sir, you're the very dew-drop we're after."

"Then I say you have no proof of what you assert against me. This is a conspiracy against my character."

"Oh, you obsequious young cuss," exclaimed Old Jim, "we have proof of all we assert against you. We know it is good proof, too—the same that proved to us that these little gals war confined on a lake up this way. Thar's no discount on this, Dolphy. The lovely princess, Dove-Eyes, showed us the photograpf of the slick and cunning cuss that wen her little untutored heart only to break it all up—the same smilin' scoundrel that, havin' failed to possess Kitty Hamlin by fair means, resorted to foul. You're that very tulip, Randolph Hill of Pine Valley, White Lance, o' the Indian village, and Jack Laclede o' Cuthbert Blake's associates. You're a triangular sort o' cuss, ain't you? Got a Sunday name? Don't know that dyin' wench, do you? Oh, you're a martyr, a saint, an angel, ain't you?"

"I will not stand this," said Hill, turning as if to leave the presence of his tormentor.

"Hold on, there, Dolphy-Hill-White-Lance-Laclede!" exclaimed Old Columbia Jim, drawing a bead on the dumfounded villain; "you can't get away so easy as that. You're our mutton, old boy. You'd better go and 'tend to your dyin' negro servant and keeper o' yer ex-prisoners. I've the drap on you, ole boy, and by the mother o' Adam, I'll bore you through if you attempt to flee!"

Hill stopped, cast the look of a demon at the old borderman, then turned his head and looked off through the grove in an eager, anxious way.

"Got some friends out there?" asked Old Jim.

A sinister smile flitted over the villain's face as he quickly placed his fingers to his lips and uttered a shrill whistle.

Minkskin Mike glanced quickly behind him, for he knew the whistle was a signal to friends; but seeing that it had answered a double purpose by calling up Cyclone Charlie and the other boys, whom he saw advancing through the grove, the young sharpshooter firmly stood his ground.

As suspected, Cuthbert Blake, followed by two other murderous-looking villains, at once appeared upon the scene, and although Blake started at sight of Old Columbia Jim as though confronted by a ghost, the face of Randolph Hill assumed a look of devilish triumph.

"Boys," he said, as his friends came up, "we've got to do some of our work over; do you see that old fiend, Columbia Jim, still lives? Say, Jim, I hold the cards now, and I call your hand—"

"Do, do you?" retorted Old Jim, as Cyclone Charlie and his three companions appeared from the bushes, pistols in hand, and ready for the fray.

Randolph Hill was again thwarted, and never was such a look of abject terror depicted on a coward's face as upon his. He turned white, his lips became drawn, his knees trembled.

"You see, don't you," said Old Jim, "if this is to be a game o' poker and the keerds livin' men, we see you and go you two better. D'y'e call my hand now, Dolphy?" and receiving no answer from the dumfounded villain, the old man turned to Blake and continued: "and so we meet again, Mr. Blake, on this side o' etarinity?"

"You're the devil's friend and associate, Jim Muchmore," the evil-browed, scarlet-faced villain retorted.

"No, I'm not your friend, Cuthbert Blake."

"Have a care, sir, how you speak!" thundered the outlaw, and his words were accompanied by the click of his revolver.

"Oh, men!" cried Kitty, imploringly, "do not quarrel—do not fight, I implore you!"

"Be easy, little gals," said Old Jim; "we've been fightin' for days and nights for your sakes, and now that we've found you, we'll shed every drap o' blood in our veins before them hell-bounds shall touch a hair o' your sweet little heads."

Blake broke into a low, sneering laugh. He tried to divert the attention of the brigade, that he and his friends might take them off their guard, but not an eye was moved from the villains, whose every movement was watched with fixed eyes and ready weapons, brave hearts and determined spirits.

Suddenly a heavy breathing, accompanied with gasping for breath, called Kitty to old Dinah's side.

"Oh, heavens!" the maiden cried, clasping her hands to her breast, "she is dying! dying! Oh, poor woman!"

But not a soul of the two belligerent parties

moved an eye or a muscle. They seemed deaf to the maiden's lamentations. A deadly conflict was brewing, and the glance of an eye or the movement of a hand might precipitate the conflict.

It was a dreadful moment—a dreadful scene. The four renegades and outlaws stood facing Old Jim and the five boys in a silence that was broken only by the sobs of Kitty and Alice, who were kneeling by the side of the dying woman.

Suddenly a low sad wail breaks from Kitty's lips, and dropping her clasped hands in her lap, she lifted her face and in a half choked voice said:

"She's dead."

Every man heard her words, but not a soul save Old Jim moved. He turned his head slightly. The outlaws saw the movement, and made an attempt to draw their weapons; but the boy brigade was too quick for them. Five pistols cracked as one, and three of the villains fell dead. Randolph Hill alone stood unharmed, pale, trembling, and the picture of abject fear.

Not a shot did the outlaws have time to fire—not an effort did Randolph Hill make to escape or defend himself.

"The wages of sin is death, Hill," said Minkskin Mike to the cowering wretch.

"Are there no hopes for me?" he finally asked, in an humble, pleading tone.

"None," was the response.

The sun was just going down behind the western tree-tops, when the canoe, in which the villain Hill and his confederates had gone to the island, put out across the water toward the mainland, carrying four persons, Minkskin Mike, Cyclone Charlie, and Kitty and Alice, while close behind followed the raft with Columbia Jim and the rest of the brigade.

Randolph Hill was not within them. Five newly made graves on the island told their own tale. Dove-Eyes had been avenged.

Reaching the shore the little party began its journey southward under the cover of the night. The utmost precaution would have to be observed, for the woods were full of savages hunting for the dreaded Sharp Shoot.

It was many weary days of marching and hiding before the party finally reached the friends of Kitty and Alice with the maidens unharmed; but with their safe delivery the work of the brigade did not end. All through that terrible Indian war they served with distinction, and when peace was again restored to the distracted state, the settlers returned to Pine Valley where they found their homes in ashes, and ruin and desolation on every hand. But with that pluck so characteristic of the frontier settler, they rebuilt their houses and soon everything was restored to its former condition, and peace and happiness reigned.

And in the course of time Minkskin Mike and Cyclone Charlie became citizens of the place, having laid aside their rifles and settled down amid the pleasures of home life—Mike the husband of Kitty, and Cyclone the husband of Alice.

As to Old Columbia Jim, he is still Old Columbia. He never married the princess Dove-Eyes as he declared he would, for the reason, so he said, that he found it took two to make a bargain of that kind.

THE END.

THE

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